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Schoolhouses Remembered: The Story Behind the Nostalgic Image: An Active Pursuit of the Truth

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SCHOOLHOUSES REMEMBERED: THE STORY BEHIND THE NOSTALGIC IMAGE

An Active Pursuit of the Truth

A Thesis

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In Partial Fulfillment

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Michelle Dawn Cude

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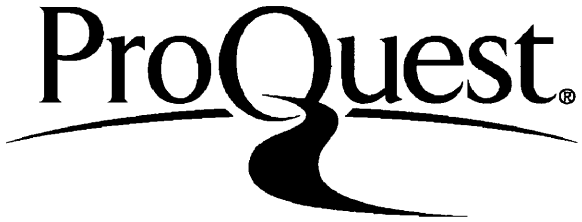

APPROVAL SHEET

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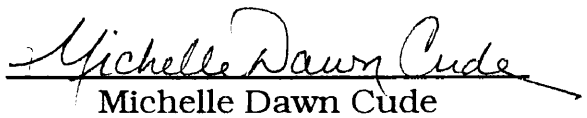

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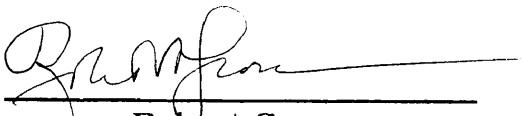
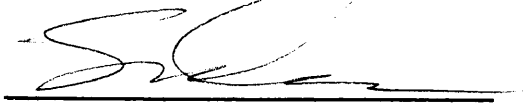


Robert Gross

Kimberley L. ~~Kim~~ Phillips



Scott Nelson

In School Days
(1869)

by
JOHN GREENLEAF WHITTIER

Still sits the school-house by the road,
A ragged beggar sunning;
Around it still the sumachs grow,
And the blackberry-vines are running.

Within, the master's desk is seen,
Deep scarred by raps official;
The warping floor, the battered seats,
The jack-knife's carved initial;

The charcoal frescoes on its wall;
Its door's worn sill, betraying
The feet that, creeping slow to school,
Went storming out to playing!

Long years ago a winter sun
Shone over it at setting;
Lit up its western window-panes,
And low eaves' icy fretting.

It touched the tangled golden curls,
And brown eyes full of grieving,
Of one who still her steps delay
When all the school were leaving.

For near her stood the little boy
Her childish favor singled;
His cap pulled low upon a face
Where pride and shame were mingled.

Pushing with restless feet the snow
To right and left, he lingered;--
As restlessly her tiny hands
The blue-checked apron fingered.

He saw her lift her eyes; he felt
The soft hand's light caressing,
And heard the tremble of her voice,
As if a fault confessing.

"I'm sorry that I spelt the word:
I hate to go above you,
Because,"--the brown eyes lower fell.--
"Because, you see, I love you!"

Still memory to a gray-haired man
That sweet child-face is showing.
Dear girl! the grasses on her grave
Have forty years been growing!

He lives to learn, in life's hard school,
How few who pass above him
Lament their triumph and his loss,
Like her,--because they love him.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In thesis-writing, as in life, all honor and glory be unto God. I thank Him for leading me on this journey. I have grown, laughed, loved, and shared my heart with many along the way. The experience of researching and writing this thesis has indeed been an adventure. What is learning, if it is not an adventure?

For allowing their daughter to venture forth across the country in a twenty-seven foot motorhome, my parents deserve the greatest measure of my gratitude. I thank them for their faith and trust, and for all their days and nights of assistance in writing this thesis---dictionary and computer manuals in hand. Most of all, they have been my source of strength and encouragement.

Along the way, countless people have lent a hand in my journey. It would be impossible to list them all, or recount all of their many deeds, yet I am indebted to them nonetheless. Docents at the many local historical societies and museums, librarians, residents, and local guides all contributed to this final product. Former country school students and teachers responded to my call for interviews, without which this paper would lack much of its valuable evidence. And, the original coursework was funded in large part through scholarships from both Colonial Williamsburg Foundation and the College of William and Mary. My seventh-grade students willingly participated in the testing experiment, and kept me inspired as a twentieth-century teacher. Professor Gross challenged me to greater intellectual analysis and significant improvements in my arguments and writing. His assistance was crucial at all points, from shaping the original ideas to sharpening the final arguments. I thank him immeasurably for his patience

and persistence. Finally, for their encouragement and prayers, I thank my dear friends.

To everyone who gave me such needed support, especially through the taxing writing process and culmination of many years' work, THANK YOU from the bottom of my heart. You believed in me even when I lost faith in myself. God bless you all.

ABSTRACT

The magical appeal of the one-room schoolhouse is apparent to anyone familiar with popular Americana, or anyone charmed by their grandparents' stories of walking miles in the drifted snow to get to a little clapboard schoolhouse warmed by a pot-bellied stove. Seeking to find the historical truth behind this cultural icon was no less an adventure. ***What was the country school experience really like for the thousands of students and teachers who went through its doors?*** This question became the central focus of my thesis.

The pursuit of this truth took me from one shore to the next, across countless cornfields and down winding dirt roads through the heart of rural America. There I found hundreds of one-room schoolhouses still standing, and many aging country school graduates who were willing to share their stories with anyone who would listen. So, I listened. And I recorded their tales of mischief and magic, recitation and first love, recess games of ante-over and tobacco-spitting through knotholes in the schoolhouse floor.

As I placed these nostalgic memories next to the contemporary reformers' reports which criticized the one-room schools, the contradictions became glaringly evident. Certainly the memoirs were overly positive and biased. Yet the reformers' reports also had a political agenda which skewed their message, something which is largely ignored by most historians who treat their reports as unquestionable accounts. In this thesis, I employ a thorough examination and analysis of the extant sources: nostalgic memoirs, reformers' reports, letters and diaries, and material culture, in order to reflect as many aspects of the experience as possible. Additionally, by setting the memories within their historical context, I determined that the schoolhouse symbolized far more to the community than an education---it embodied the whole spirit of rural community values.

The conclusions of this study, then, point to a more complex image of what the one-room school stood for and how it was experienced than most historians acknowledge. This study also leads to a wider realization that the past is more of an impressionistic painting than a clear photographic image. There is not ***one*** truth to be found, but rather ***a collection of truths***, each representing an individual's own experience of the country school. What is history more than an aggregate set of experiences? And thus, we conclude that collective memory holds a valid place along with other historical sources as accurately revealing a piece of the past.

SCHOOLHOUSES REMEMBERED: THE STORY BEHIND THE NOSTALGIC IMAGE

An Active Pursuit of the Truth

CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION: THE MYSTERY OF THE SCHOOLHOUSE

Picture a red clapboard structure, simple and sensible in design, standing tall in a bucolic setting amidst grasses and woods nearby, with matching outhouses in back for boys and girls. Inside, a set of twenty youths is developing their moral and intellectual abilities under the watchful eye of an endearing teacher.[1] What modern teacher would not fantasize about the existence of such a "dream world" immortalized in the one-room schoolhouse? Set against the apathy of contemporary students, the impersonal, bureaucratic structure of the modern district, and the increasing distance of parents from the education of their children, this nineteenth-century world has special appeal. As a seventh grade teacher in one of the largest school systems in the nation, I have found myself yearning for this idyllic scene. But truthfully, my interest in old-fashioned one-room schools dates back much further to the time when I was nine.

I grew up in the "Little House on the Prairie" generation. I can remember racing my best friend Janet through the whole series for the third time. Laura Ingalls Wilder's books carried us into what seemed a magical time, one of romping through prairies and going to a little country school where a kind teacher made school fun. In fourth grade, Janet and I had matching long, calico dresses complete with sunbonnets made by our mothers . . . just like Laura

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[1]Obviously this is an idealized image, playing off the cultural icon of the "Little Red Schoolhouse."

Ingalls! When I was twelve, my family made a pilgrimage to De Smit, South Dakota to trace the trail of the Ingalls' covered wagon. I even got to sit on the banks of Plum Creek, just like Laura did in her book! It was a dream come true.

Since I grew up in the heart of Silicon Valley, California, in this brave new world of high tech, is it any wonder that those times seemed magical? I was surrounded by fast-paced suburbia, living in a tract house over the hill from IBM. In my mind, vast stretches of open grassland existed merely in books and movies, as did the neighborly, close-knit communities like Walnut Grove where the Ingalls lived. In my world, my parents were teachers coping with students on drugs who used foul language and were apathetic to the whole school scene. Public education seemed my calling too, but not among those kids! So, instead, I dreamed of teaching in a one-room school where students greet their teacher with a warm "good morning." Even the mischief of ink-dipped braids and contraband frogs seemed light-hearted and innocent.

CHAPTER II
SEEKING ONE-ROOM SCHOOLS

Even in my more mature and sophisticated adulthood, I have found the one-room school has not lost its old-fashioned appeal for me. As I was pondering my newly chosen career as a public school teacher, it had yet another attraction to me. I was marveling at the profound effect the schoolteacher of long ago reportedly had on her students, while questioning how I could duplicate that today. I wondered at her secret. My Great Aunt Ruby told me inspiring stories, drawing from her forty-eight years of teaching, starting in a country school at age sixteen. Was the one-room schoolhouse as enchanting a place as it seemed? Secretly I doubted, but found myself somehow wanting to believe it was true.

So, I set out across the country to discover the truth behind the mythical image of the one-room schoolhouse. I took only the essentials for the journey: computer, camera, and my cat, Sebastian. Driving in a used twenty-seven foot motorhome purchased for this adventure, I wove my way from California through the desert states and into Texas where I would encounter my first one-room schoolhouse on this trip.

Arriving in late afternoon at the small town of McLean, Texas, I must have looked forlorn as I stood at the window of the local museum, reading the sign that said "open by appointment only." Something told me, at this point, that McLean, Texas was nearly a genuine "ghost town." The old Avalon theatre across the street was boarded up, but through the cracks I could distinguish red

velvet curtains and a gorgeous chandelier---signs that this town must have had a lively past. I could only imagine that there must have been a little red schoolhouse somewhere just around the corner. As I was turning to go, two ladies walked by and asked if I was looking for something. I briefly explained my project and they eagerly told me of an old schoolhouse in a farmer's nearby field. I was hot on the trail of my first real schoolhouse!

Driving the motorhome down winding dirt roads with only enough room for a steer to pass beside us was merely the start of the adventure. Once I finally located the field, the sun was beginning to set. Then I saw her---red brick with a hipped metal roof and a small porch topped by wide double doors. It was a utilitarian design architecturally, standing tall and once-proud, now neglected, surrounded by flat, dusty, dry fields as far as the eye could see. The fading light was transfixing and I was entranced by the thought of children running up these steps while the teacher stood ringing her brass bell. Inside I saw bare feet dangling from wooden seats, eyes gazing out these now-broken windows, minds absorbing algebra, and stubby fingers mastering penmanship. But cows had taken over the old schoolhouse now; there was ample evidence of that, and the farmer stored old tools and discarded tires here too. I wondered, though, what stories these walls could tell.

Stepping back outside, I felt as if I should take off my shoes before a burning bush, but it was only the orange-blazing sun setting behind a mass of tumbleweeds. As I turned to leave, I realized this was only the beginning of the journey---a journey that promised new discoveries around the next corner and much to learn from these old, weathered schoolhouses. So, I was off to see more down the road.

I was heading for the Gardner Museum of Architecture and Design in Quincy, Illinois. Pamela Larson, program director/curator, had sent me

McLean, Texas: Schoolhouse and Town View

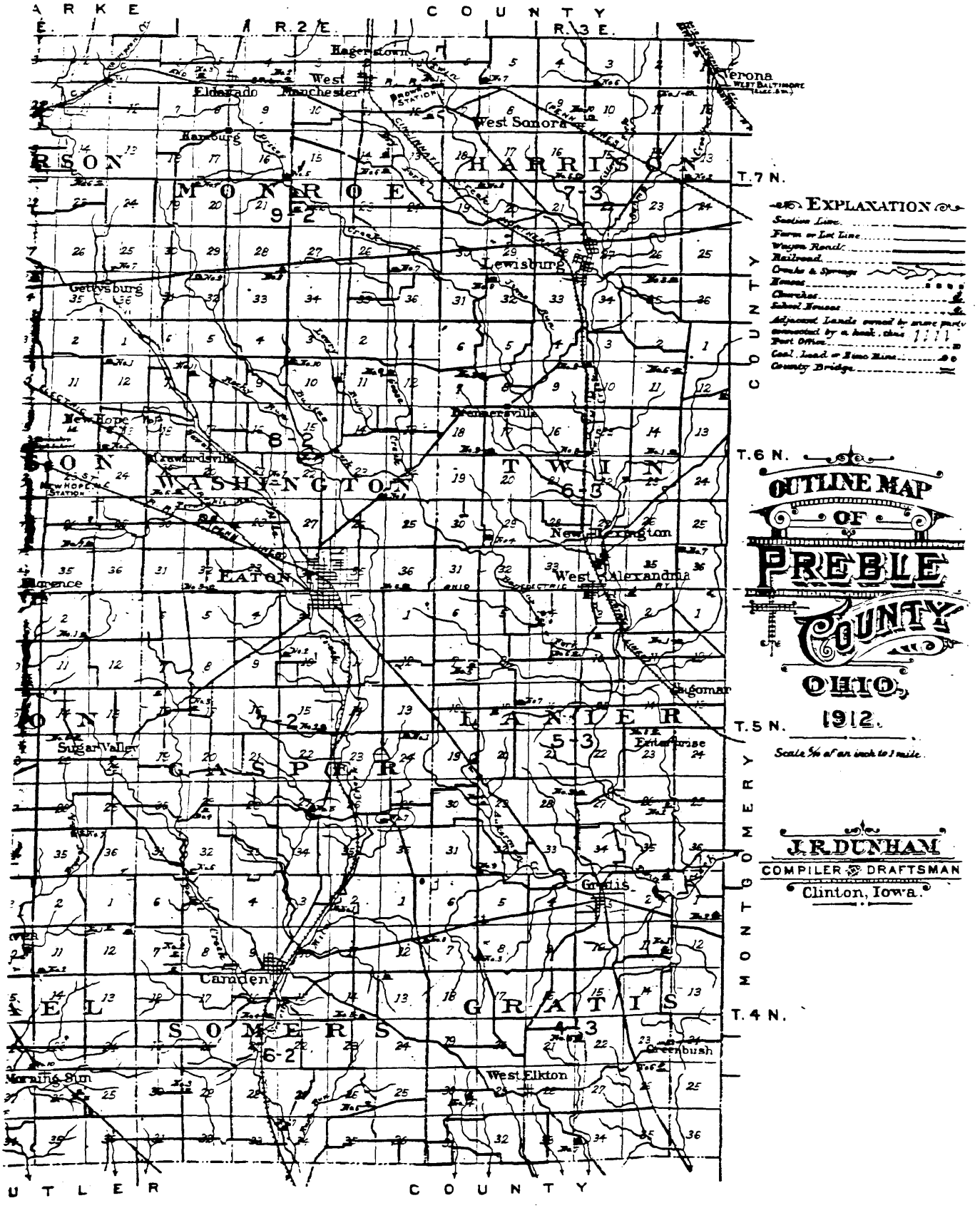
information about their exhibit "Country Schoolhouses." I found the source materials in their research room more useful than the exhibit itself, but the museum's interpretation of the days of one-room schools interested me. I wanted to find out what image of the country school we are portraying in our public history museums. Are we glorifying the history, or presenting it in a clear and balanced way? I found the latter was true at the Gardner Museum, but not at all museums I encountered later. Previously I had done some background research which gave me more questions than answers; but, I quickly found out that the best sources are the wrinkled, old man at the gas station who has lived here all his life; the loquacious, young woman at the local history museum; and even the clerk at the local market. The best of truly local history is in the hearts and minds of those who have lived there for generations and have come to appreciate it. I actually sensed it was a source of pride in some of these small towns that a researcher had come all the way from California *just* to see their schoolhouse. Coming from a state where people never seem to settle and get roots, it was refreshing to meet so many people who had lived in a town for generations. "Here is the schoolhouse where my mother and sister went to school, and my grandmother taught until she got married," they would tell me with an admirable sense of pride.

As it turned out, Vernon, the campground security guard at the New Paris Family Campground in Ohio, was one of my best sources. So, I decided to settle in for a few weeks in this northwestern section of Ohio, resplendent as it was with existing schoolhouses and local guides to show me around the county. On his day off, Vernon took me on a tour of the many remaining schoolhouses. These buildings had assumed new roles as homes, a community dance hall, a church, a mortuary, and a welder's workshop. Vernon's appreciation for the local schools was so inspiring that I explored even farther on my own the next

day. Equipped with a 1912 county map, I bravely parked the motorhome on country roads, found my way through grasses taller than I, and stepped over dried snakeskins. I found the country schools by correlating the old map with the current roads and landmarks. Suddenly, there it would be, in all its abandoned glory. Somehow I liked them better this way than pretty and shiny, made into a dwelling or museum. Here I could sleuth around to find a way in, then sit amidst the dust, spider webs, and mice droppings to contemplate the scenes of bygone days.

I found the Preble County Historical Society to be a gold mine of useful material. Here I met the president of the society, Jane Lightner, whose assistance was invaluable. She introduced me to Ione Hiestand, the guru of local lore and author of the extensive *Preble County History*. Ione's passion for preserving local history is surpassed only by her love for sharing the stories. Others at the Historical Society were especially helpful in bringing me new material while I squirreled away in the research room. The Historical Society had set up a demonstration area in the barn next door where schoolchildren could come and experience a bit of the past at a makeshift schoolhouse. I was most impressed by how frequently the local schools made use of this beneficial resource to study their local heritage.

Moving on to Allentown, Pennsylvania, I was able to observe an actual living history demonstration at the Claussville schoolhouse. Mrs. Curry, dressed as a stereotypical schoolmarm, was there to greet the fourth grade students as they filed in. Moving awkwardly between first- and third-person interpretation, she explained what it would have been like to go to school there. The children were most awed when told of the harsh discipline of the schoolmaster or



Map of Preble County, Ohio, 1912. Used by the author to locate one-room schoolhouses. These are indicated on the map by their No. and a small image of a schoolhouse.

District No. 4, Washington Township, Preble Co., Ohio

I spoke with the current owner, Jim Montgomery, who is a friend of my tour guide Vernon. We conversed about his remodeling of the schoolhouse which he now uses as a converted warehouse/storage area. He fondly recalled the days when he attended this very same schoolhouse as a youth. His Aunt was a teacher here, as well.

District No. 1, Dixon Township, Preble Co., Ohio

District No. 10, Washington Township, Preble Co, Ohio (Built in 1906)

District No. 2, Dixon Township, Preble Co., Ohio

mistress.[2] Yet, it is easy to shock today's youth with exaggerated tales of yesteryear, and this was essentially an exercise in the shock value of history. Truth had to be more convincing than this, I told myself; and yet, I was still missing much of the picture of life in the one-room school.

Therefore, I continued north into New York and settled near Albany for another week's stay and local investigation. Schoharie Public Library produced a wealth of old articles along the line of "Life in the Good Ol' Days." They were based on local people's memories. How true are these, I wondered. I was beginning to see the conflicting sides of this story. The historians I was reading along the way were telling me of the despicable conditions in one-room schools, while former students and teachers were telling me of the "glory" of those days. Someone has got to be way off base, I reasoned, as you cannot have both deplorable and delightful in the same place at the same time. This became the central mystery of the schoolhouse for me. In my quest, I determined to unearth the solution. What began as a four-month journey is now going on four years.

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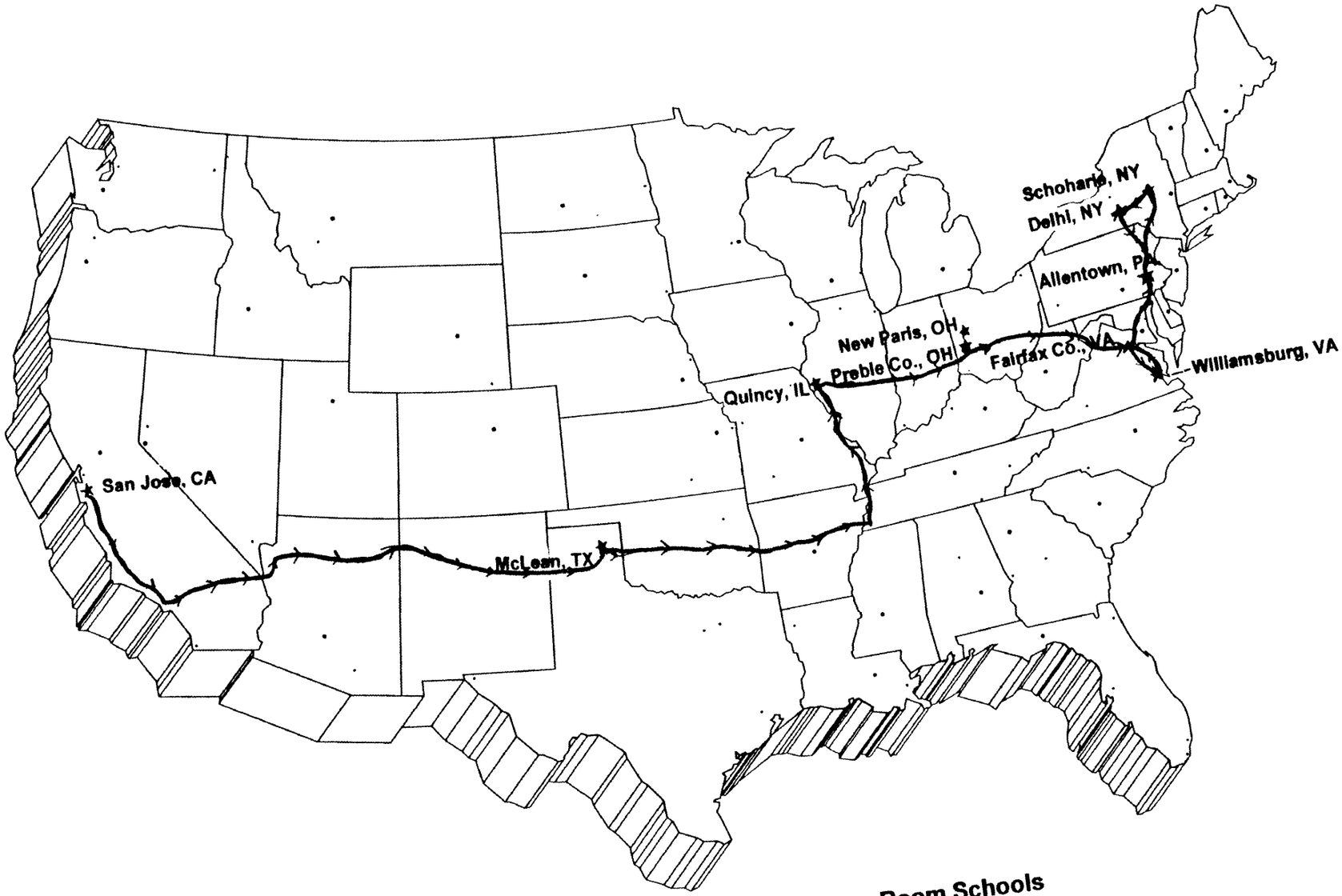
[2]Phyllis Curry, Historical Interpretation to Saukin Valley Elementary schoolchildren, LeHigh Historical Society, Claussville One-room Schoolhouse, Allentown, Pennsylvania, June, 1994.



Travels Across the Country in Pursuit of One-Room Schools

CHAPTER III
RESEARCHING ONE-ROOM SCHOOLS

Scope of the Research and Current Scholarship

Following the course of my travels, the recollections and sources I gathered came from all geographic regions across the United States. Whenever possible, I have given dates of attendance and the geographic location of the subject along with the quotation. For the purposes of this paper, we are focusing on the period of time when the one-room school flourished before it succumbed to the fervent cry for "modernization." The heyday for one-room schools was approximately 1870-1930. Certain pockets of sparsely populated areas maintained rural schooling into the 1950's. In some seven hundred isolated localities across the country, one-teacher schools are still functioning,[3]

In this paper, the terms *common school*, *country school*, *rural school*, and *one-room school* are interchangeable. I will use the term *district schools* to differentiate those which came before the country schools. It will be vital in this study to understand the significant differences between them.

The district schools were in service from the early to mid-1800's. This early school was sparsely furnished with wooden benches without backs, and the "desks" were merely pieces of flat wood nailed into the walls of the schoolhouse. These earlier buildings had a multiplicity of faults: poor

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[3]Andrew Gulliford, America's Country Schools (Washington D.C.: The Preservation Press, 1991), 278.

construction, drafty windows or only greased paper for window slits, exploding stoves, and lack of outhouses. The teachers of the district schools were most often male, usually on their way to college or a career. They were predominantly described as cruel and strict, quick to beat the lessons into the heads or the backsides of their scholars. Theodore Dwight visited a school in Connecticut in the 1830's and observed:

> The teacher was mending pens for one class, which was sitting idle; hearing another spell; calling a covey of small boys to be quiet who had nothing to do but make mischief; watching a big rogue who had been placed standing on a bench in the middle of the room for punishment; and, to many little ones, passionately answering questions of "May I go out? . . . May I drink?"[4]

This harbor of confusion, while not unfamiliar in the first half of the century, was not representative of most schools in the second half, as this paper will demonstrate.

Another point of confusion between common schools and district schools concerns the number of scholars they held. The district schools often numbered up to sixty pupils, while I found the later common schools averaged fewer than twenty pupils. In an effort to investigate this, I conducted studies in different regions of the United States using various sources from the latter half of the century. By calculating the number of students mentioned in schools in Siskiyou County, I found the following averages: mean=14.6 students; mode=1-10 students; median=11-20 students. Statistics from all of the photographs I studied in books and museums across the United States show the following averages: mean=16.25 students; mode=11-20 students; median=11-20 students. These statistics correlate with those of three other studies I

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[4]Theodore Dwight, Things As The Are: or, Notes of a Traveller Through Some of the Middle and Northern States (New York: 1834), 123, as quoted in Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society: 1780-1860, Carl F. Kaestle (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983), 17.

conducted. Overall, the mean number of students per rural school was below twenty.[5]

Current scholarship on one-room schools tends to be very harsh in its judgment. Most historians have criticized the country school for what it lacked and how it failed, with two notable exceptions: Wayne E. Fuller's *The Old Country School: The Story of Rural Education in the Middle West* and Andrew Gulliford's *America's Country Schools*.[6] Historians point to the flaws of the schoolhouse and discredit any positive aspects as being exaggerated nostalgic memories. While I certainly agree with the validity of some of their claims, I would propose that these memories give a credible impression of each individual's experience in a one-room school.

An Overview of the Sources

The journey and subsequent research have yielded four separate categories of sources for the study of the one-room school:

1. the ***students' and teachers' writings*** at the time of their involvement with the school,
2. the ***artifacts*** of the one-room schools including the schoolhouses themselves,
3. the critiques of the ***educational reformers*** at that time,
4. the later ***memoirs of the students and teachers*** reflecting back thirty to seventy years earlier when they attended or taught at a one-room school.

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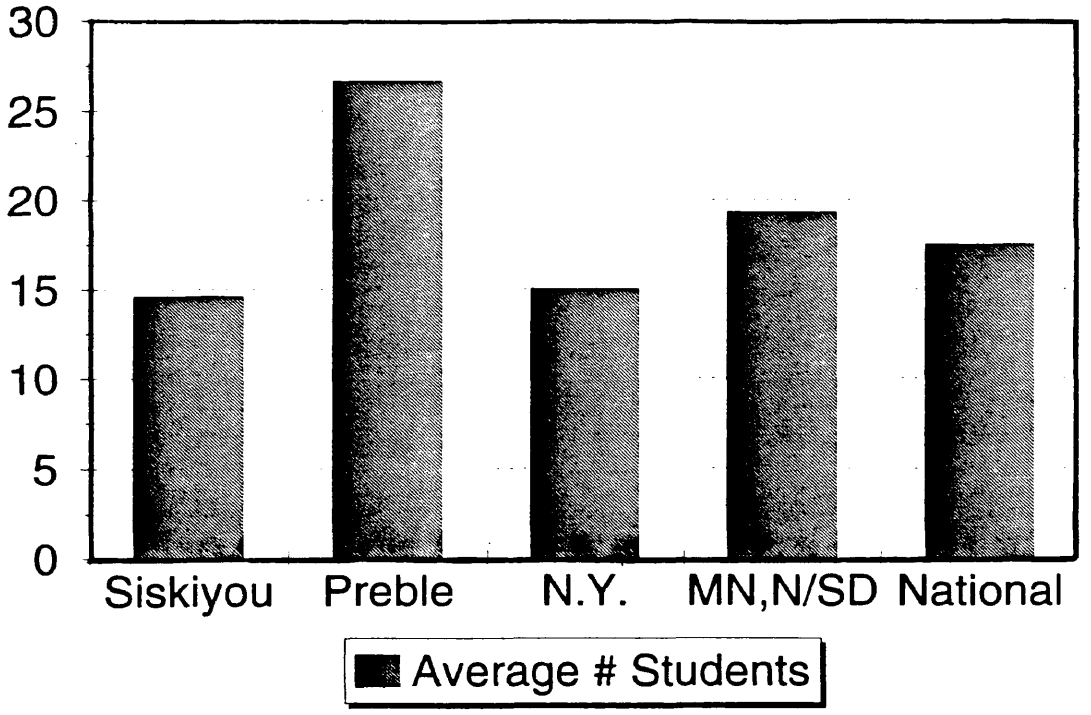
[5]See chart and graph on following pages. Sources for the chart and graph: Sharon Ninteman Miller, The Siskiyou Pioneer and Yearbook: One-Room Schools, 6, no. 2 (Yreka, CA, 1989); Miscellaneous sources at the Preble County Historical Society Library compiled by the author; Pamela Hillebrand, Treasures of the One-room School (Deposit, N.Y.: Courier Printing, 1988), and further collected references by the author.

[6]Wayne E. Fuller, The Old Country School: The Story of Rural Education in the Middle West (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982); and Gulliford, America's Country Schools.

SCHOOL POPULATIONS

1870-1930
Students Per One-Room Schoolhouses

Averages	Siskiyou	Preble	New York	MN,ND,SD	National
Mean	14.6	26.6	15	19.3	17.5
Mode	1-10	11-20	11-20	11-20	11-20
Median	11-20	20.5	11-20	11-20	11-20



Each group of sources sheds light on a particular aspect of the country school so that together they can create a mosaic of the experiences of education in the one-room school. For the purposes of this paper, we will focus on the nostalgic memoirs collected across the United States. Then, by setting them within the historical context and by comparing and contrasting them with the other sources, we can arrive at a more complete understanding of the one-room school. As Jacques Le Goff stated in his book *History and Memory*, we recognize that "historical fact is constructed and that documents are not innocent . . . but this observation must not result in . . . an abandonment of the notion of *truth* in history."[7] Prior to our analysis of the one-room school experience using these various sources, it will be useful to briefly highlight each type of source, and indicate its relative strengths and weaknesses.

The ***journals and letters of the students and teachers*** allow us to revisit the daily life inside the country school of that era. As concurrent writings, they reflect the least alteration that occurs over time and distance from the actual event; yet, they still reflect the writer's own personal biases and judgments. Since many of the journals and letters give only a cursory account of the basic activities in the school, we are left wondering what parts of the story have been overlooked by the writer. Furthermore, due to their personal nature, the experience of the writer may not be typical of that particular place or time. For example, we may unwittingly read the journal of the "teacher's pet" and mistakenly generalize that all students adored their teacher. Keeping in mind

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[7]Jacques Le Goff, History and Memory, transl. by Steven Rendall and Elizabeth Claman (New York: Columbia Press, 1992), xviii.

these cautions, though, the historian will still find appropriate uses for these primary sources.

Physical artifacts add an important dimension to the study of one-room schools. More than the factual asset, the kinesthetic connection makes the historical study seem more real. Examining the 1856 textbooks, the painted "black" board, and the carved initials on double-seat desks became a valuable part of my research. Likewise, my journeys into the world of the one-room school would not have been as colorful or as meaningful without my various encounters with the actual physical structure. From the modern Amish one-room school in Pennsylvania, complete with German-speaking, barefoot children, to the dilapidated, overgrown schools of Ohio farmers, the experience of being inside the four walls of a schoolhouse made the other historical sources come alive. While this is not meant to be an architectural or material culture study, those elements were an integral part of this thesis.

We will also consult the ***reformers' reports on the one-room schools*** in the educational journals of the late nineteenth century. Educational reformers, beginning with Horace Mann in the 1840's, sought to awaken the public to the poor conditions of the current educational situation. They visited country schools in their region and wrote prolifically about the abuses such as unqualified teachers, repetitive lessons, and poor ventilation in the district schools. Given their positions and expertise, the voices of these reformers ought to be considered; however, it is important to note that they are most often referring to the conditions of the district schools, not the later improved country schools. They also had a narrow geographic exposure to one-room schools, as they visited and wrote about occurrences predominantly in the Northeast. Furthermore, they had an obvious agenda. Their reports on the schools usually emphasized the negative in order to win approval for proposed reforms.

Most importantly for this paper, we encounter a vivid image of schoolhouse life through the ***memoirs of the students and teachers*** as they reflect on their experiences thirty to seventy years ago. These memoirs are usually steeped in a heady nostalgia. However, they are not without their use to the historian who chooses to analyze them carefully, always bearing in mind their exaggerated optimism and selectivity. My own collection of these nostalgic memoirs has taken the form of personal interviews, written survey forms, and published collections of anecdotes, usually sponsored by a local historical society or an interested individual. Gathering anecdotes has become a favorite hobby for amateur historians, retired teachers associations, and custodians of local lore. These nostalgic memories constitute the major focus of this thesis, as we try to determine the story behind the nostalgia: why are one-room schools remembered so fondly?

The historical context and other primary and secondary sources will be brought to bear upon the recollections in order fully to understand the experiences in country schools. Owing to the nature of these memoirs, however, it will be useful to consider the influence of nostalgia within a historical source. What part does nostalgia play in the cultural memory? Is a nostalgic remembrance a valid historical source?

The Nature of Nostalgia as a Historical Source

Ask your grandparents to tell you about their "growing up" years, and the conversation will inevitably turn to their schooling. And then, you will likely get an earful of the teachers they liked and did not, the pranks they pulled, their schoolmates and first sweetheart, the six miles they walked to school through the ten-foot drifts of snow, the recess games, and a host of other seemingly insignificant facts about their school years. Chances are only half the facts are

correct, half embellished, exaggerated, or purely imagined. The teacher will be far prettier, the walk far longer, and the achievements far more impressive. My grandfather's walk to school in Oklahoma has gotten longer every year. Such is the nature of memory. It has a way of being changed through the years, sometimes consciously, more often unconsciously. As David Lowenthal describes, "Nostalgia transcends yearnings for lost childhoods and scenes of early life, embracing imagined pasts never experienced by their devotees or perhaps by anyone."[8] Nostalgia distorts, selects, and forgets parts of the story, and then paints the rest with a rose-colored tint. A clipping from an 1880's newspaper warns of the exaggerated happiness of people who have

> . . .invested the past with such a halo of beauty. . . To them all the circumstances of their childhood are irradiated with an unreal light, and that which was hard and homely and rough, is softened and rounded by the lapse of years, till it seems to them as beautiful as an ancient and ivy-clad ruin, in the soft light of the harvest moon.[9]

This certainly makes the historian wary of using these memories as historical sources.

Despite the influence of nostalgia, the remembrances of former one-room school students give us a picture of what it was like to be a pupil or a teacher there. Although they provide only one piece of the puzzle, it is a valuable piece as it prompts us to ask deeper questions and challenges us to avoid a dry detatchment to history by emphasizing the personal experience. Together with the reformers' reports, the journals of the time, and other primary source

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[8]David Lowenthal, The Past is a Foreign Country (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), xix.

[9]"The Old School-house and the New; or, Fifty Years Ago and To-day" Article from 1880's newspaper as reprinted in Pamela Larson, Gardner Museum of Architecture and Design Educator Handbook, unpublished manual for schoolteachers, September 1993, Gardner Museum of Architecture and Design, Quincy, IL.

materials, these memories will help us better understand the past. Lowenthal supports the use of memory alongside other valid historical sources:

> As modes of access to the past, memory, history, and relics exhibit important resemblances and differences. By its very nature personal and hence largely unverifiable, memory extends back only to childhood. . . . Yet all history depends on memory, and many recollections incorporate history. And they are alike distorted by selective perception, intervening circumstance, and hindsight. . . . This is not to deny that historical consensus and collective memory are anchored in reality and provide real knowledge of the past.[10]

What follows, then, is a collection of anecdotes and memories from both teachers and students of the country schools. By far most of the quotations are gathered from elderly adults who look back on their childhood in the one-room school with a definitive nostalgic tone. This glossy remembrance has often hidden the fractures and failures of the country school system. Many of those interviewed were aware of their nostalgic tone, yet were unapologetic. As Peg Manuel said of her years in the one-room school (1946-1951; Cook County, Illinois): "All memories of my five years at [the] country school are very wonderful. I'm sure that part of the glow comes with age. While I'm sure there were negatives, they seem to have faded into the mist of time."[11] Yet, there is still much to glean from their remembrances. According to a study conducted by Craig R. Barclay of the University of Rochester, autobiographical memory does have a certain truth about it. Rather than focus on the details that may be inaccurate from memory, we must seek the meaning of the experience that is accurately conveyed through recollections. Autobiographical memory is "honest and truthful in the sense that reconstructions of past life events incorporate the

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[10]Lowenthal, xxii, 215.

[11]Peg Manuel, written interview with author, Fredericksburg, VA, 24 January 1997.

meaning of events to the person."[12] The existence of the nostalgia itself compels us to explore the reasons why these memories were so glorified, and what meanings are hidden within them.

[12]Craig R. Barclay, "Truth and Accuracy in Autobiographical Memory," in Practical Aspects of Memory: Current Research and Issues, M. M. Gruneberg, P. E. Morris and R. N. Sykes, eds. (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Ltd., 1988), 289-293.

Marianne Greenfield with her mother Alta McCaffrey.
At the schoolhouse Mrs. McCaffrey attended near Delhi, New York.

Schoolhouses around Delaware County, New York

CHAPTER IV
MEMORIES OF TEACHERS

"Good school buildings and good equipment, important as they are, cannot make up for the deficiencies of teaching....It is through no mere accident, then, that the character, personality, attainments, and skill of the teacher are still looked upon as the fundamental factors in education."
from The Rural School Survey of New York State, 1922 [13]

Reminiscences about Teachers

Rae Dobyns was a student at the Lincoln School in Siskiyou County, California, 1921-1926. She fondly recalls her teacher there:

> I do not know which was the most important lesson that she gave us---a sense of curiosity about the world, an appreciation of the niceties of life, or maybe the example of her own strong determination to do the best with whatever was at hand. I missed her terribly when we moved into town the next year and my education continued at a stultified pace. We visited her often during the summer vacation and she maintained a lively interest in our progress in school, but it wasn't like being in her classroom.[14]

For former country school students, like Rae Dobyns, thinking of her schooldays brings a flood of memories. As I trace back through all the anecdotes and comments I collected across the country, I find a majority of these focus on the teachers. It seems these teachers had the most profound effect on the students they taught. In the words of one elderly Lewistown, Ohio resident:

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[13]George A. Works, ed., "Rural School Survey of New York State: A Report to the Rural School Patrons" (Ithaca, NY: The Joint Committee on Rural Schools, 1922) in Schoolhouse Interpretation Report, unbound, Delaware County Historical Society, Delhi, NY, 37.
[14]Miller, 102.

> You remember the teachers after all, being the bulwarks of a good school. A fine building and grounds may be some help, of course, but what man, in looking back, pauses to describe the schoolhouse? On the other hand, he is enthusiastic as he describes the qualities of that teacher who worked him up and set his thinking-machine going, making him hungry for knowledge.[15]

What exactly are the "qualities of that teacher" to which he refers? Former students use such words as "innovative," "caring," and "fair." Barbara Parker Stewart recalls Callie Harris, her teacher in the 1920's, who was "an inspiring teacher and . . . very innovative."[16] Melanie Dudley Fowle dedicated her written memoir of the East Fork, California community "To Audrey, With Love." Audrey Wolford was her teacher for five years at the East Fork School during the 1940's. Of Audrey, Mrs. Fowle writes, "She embodied all that was warm and good in my world. We were all equal in her eyes, and we loved and respected her."[17]

By making a close study of memoirs from Northern California, I found male and female teachers being remembered differently. Women teachers were admired for their bravery, kindness, innovation, "pluck," and devotion. Men teachers, however, were most often mentioned in light of their future career, their strict or fair discipline, or their physical appearance. Infrequently were the qualities of the heart mentioned with respect to a male teacher. This may be due to the fact that most of the memories were from older women, who would more likely feel a closer bond with their female teachers. Of the eighty-six respondents, nearly seventy-nine percent were women, while twenty-one percent were men. Of course, there were exceptions, but these gender

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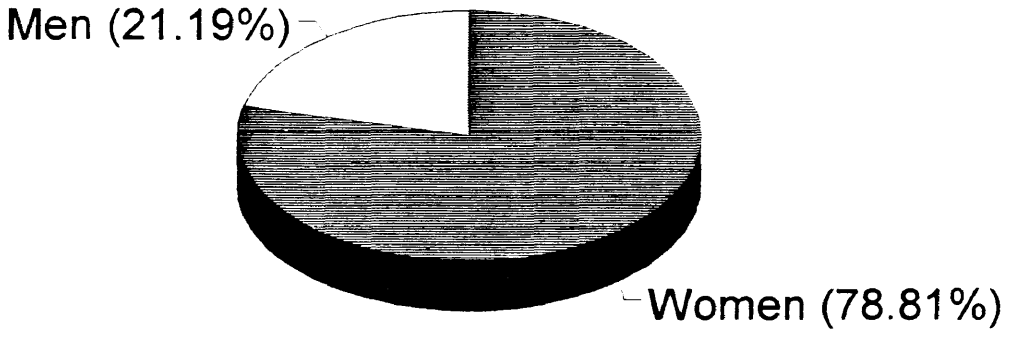
[15]New Paris Public Library, Scrapbook of Local History, New Paris Public Library, Special Collections, New Paris, OH.

[16]Miller, 129.

[17]Ibid., 132.

TEACHING PROFESSION

Siskiyou County 1870-1930



differentiations generally characterized memoirs from across the United States.[18]

How did these schoolteachers earn such heartfelt acclamation? Even considering nostalgic exaggeration, it is striking to see the preponderance of positive recollections from former students. How do we account for this, especially given the harsh criticisms of those teachers by the school reformers and later historians? The answer lies beneath the nostalgia, for "to remember is never solely to report on the past so much as to establish one's relationship toward it."[19]

Explaining the Positive Side of Reminiscences

Part of the "glow" of reminiscences comes from the events which have transpired since the schooldays. Especially, those students who went on to become professionals or teachers themselves often attribute their success to the early foundations set by their teachers. Wayne E. Fuller writes about a group of successful country school graduates who got together and were reflecting on "the forces that had shaped their lives." These forces, they concluded, were predominantly "found in their schooling and in their rural environment."[20] For many of them, their teachers were a positive role model and perhaps some of the most progressive women they had encountered. Maude Worden Bramley, of Delhi, New York, recalls Miss Andes as a very independent woman: "She was one of the first women to ride a bicycle. She had to wear a short skirt; her ankles showed!"[21] John Orrock remembers meeting a former pupil of his

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[18]Source for graph: Memoirs reprinted in Miller, Siskiyou Pioneer.

[19]Michael Lambek, "The Past Imperfect: Remembering As Moral Practice," in Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory, Paul Antze and Michael Lambek, eds. (New York: Routledge, Inc., 1996), 240.

[20]Fuller, 4.

[21]Hillebrand, 108.

mother. This man had become the CEO of one of the largest contracting firms in the United States with his office in New York City. The businessman praised the part John's mother played in his life, saying, "Your mother was one of the finest women who ever lived."[22] Certainly, this man would have gone on to more years of education after his schoolhouse experience, however, he acknowledged "Miss Lula's" contribution to his current success.

Teachers are often seen as the most influential people in one's life. John Greenleaf Whittier, whose famous poem memorializes the schoolhouse experience, credited his teacher for being the first to introduce him to poetry.[23] Had Whittier never become a poet, would he have felt so warmly about his schoolmaster who forced him to memorize so much poetry? In this way, then, the appreciation of a teacher takes on further meaning by later experiences and conditions of life.

When I interviewed Jeanette Sodergren, a ninety-seven year old, gracious woman at the Chancellor's Village Retirement Center in Fredericksburg, Virginia, she spoke warmly of her teachers at the one-room school she attended on the Eastern Shore of Maryland from 1907-1914. "I loved my teachers dearly. They were my heroes."[24] Likely they took on this heroic image since Mrs. Sodergren herself wanted to be a schoolteacher one-day. When that day came, she had even more respect for the teachers who had taught all eight grades in one room. "By that time," she said, "things were much easier. I had only the fifth, sixth, and seventh grades."[25]

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[22]John Orrock, written interview with author, Fredericksburg, VA, 19 January 1997.

[23]Lewis Leary, John Greenleaf Whittier (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1961), 21.

[24]Jeanette Sodergren, personal interview with author, Fredericksburg, VA, 15 June 1997. After a brief conversation about the nature of education back then, she added with a smile: "I guess things are a bit different now."

[25]Ibid.

The most indisputable characteristic of the one-room school seems to have been the closeness students felt with their teachers. In fact, the word *family-like* is the one most often used to describe this relationship, followed closely by "togetherness" and "close-knit."[26] Velma Bingman Elliott (Cushman School; Carmi, Illinois) recalls, "We were all so very close---family-like. Our concerns for each other were super."[27] In California, Mary Smith remembers the Christmas program in 1906: "On the designated evening for the school 'doings,' the little village of Sawyers Bar would turn out enmasse to enjoy the Christmas festivities. We felt like a close-knit family and it was a good feeling."[28] Liz Decker wrote an article about growing up in Rochester, New York entitled "Remembering a Simpler but Sometimes Riskier Life in Tabasco." She recalled, "My sister and I went to the Tabasco school and we were some of the lucky ones. We got a ride every morning with our teachers, Carolyn Murphy and Mrs. Hazel Relyea. We loved the one-room schoolhouse. It was our second home, and we were all like family."[29] Everywhere I talked to people about their country school days, the same answer was repeated. They all sensed the close community and felt this was the primary benefit of a country school education. Therefore, it seems reasonable that there was some actual closeness as the basis for these shared impressions, rather than it being purely a product of nostalgia.

Several factors could explain this close relationship between the teacher and his or her students. First, there was the often close proximity in age between the teacher and his/her students. Also, the teacher had likely grown up

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[26]Informal survey made by author of all the memoirs collected across the United States. See also: Fuller, 6, 7.

[27]Velma Bingman Elliott, written interview with author, Carmi IL, 17 February 1997.

[28]Miller, 115.

[29]Liz Decker with Barbara Robertiello, "Remembering a Simpler but Sometimes Riskier Life in Tabasco," The Accordian VIII, no. 2 (April 1994).

in the local area and thereby knew the students and their families well. As Adelaide Hardy found when she taught in her local area near Eaton, Ohio in the mid-nineteenth century, "I knew most of the children entering a class on the first day by the family resemblances," and she could tell many stories about them already.[30] The most significant factor in the close relationship was the relatively small number of students in most one-room schools, as shown by the study in the introduction.[31]

Upon closer investigation, however, this "close family feeling" may have had some drawbacks in addition to its stated benefits. Wilda Tweedie Shackelton, a teacher at Hamden School No. 5, in Walton, New York (1936-46), recalls,

> The school in which I taught for ten years was the same school that I attended for grades one through eight. It was an experience of family life, working and playing with all age groups, and knowing your neighbors well. We were just one big family. It was an experience you got nowhere else.[32]

Although Wilda Shackelton's reflections seem favorable, being "one big family" does not always connote positive images. Family tensions must have been carried into the schoolroom, complicated further by sibling rivalries and the likely comparisons of ability between brothers and sisters. Perhaps it was not always positive, but it remains the most-often lauded quality of the country school environment: the close rapport between students and teachers. Even today, it is that same sense of community which leads parents to choose private schools or home schooling where their child can flourish in the safe, nurturing environment.

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[30]Adelaide Hardy, "Youth and Young Womanhood" typescript of her memoirs, 1901, Special Collections, Eaton District Public Library, Eaton, OH.

[31] See also Bonnie Hughes Falk, Country School Memories (White Bear Lake, MN: BHF Memories Unlimited, 1986), 9.

[32]Hillebrand, 110.

Democracy in the One-Room School?

Not all remembrances by students are a fully accurate portrayal of the dynamics at work in the one-room school. Taking a deeper look at the memories reveals that the students were seeing only a child-sized portion of the full picture. Frances Crook Olson, student at Pleasant View School in Blue Earth County, Minnesota in 1917, identified her one-room school with democracy. Speaking regretfully, she acknowledged, "With the closing of our rural schools, we have lost the last stronghold of our democracy."[33] This is particularly interesting, as Frances attended school during World War I in an area of the country largely populated with German immigrants. So closely ingrained into the cultural fabric of the time, prejudices were often unnoticeable to young students reared in the very society that sponsored these beliefs. And so, we are left to wonder how well was democracy really working in the one-room school? A closer look at the historical context and several specific recollections will help us ascertain the degree and limits of the democratic experience within the country school.

Take the comment of Melanie Fowle about her teacher, Audrey Wolford: ". . .We were all equal in her eyes. . . ."[34] Perhaps Melanie Fowle's teacher ***did*** treat everyone equally, but if she had not, would Melanie have known? It is likely that the students at East Fork School were a fairly homogeneous group. If they had been from less similar social or ethnic backgrounds, would the same feeling of equality have prevailed?

To see the limits of Audrey Wolford's impartiality, we must consider who was ***not*** sitting in her classroom. "All equal in her eyes" did not represent ***all*** of society, just all of the homogeneous group which happened to sit under her

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[33]Falk, 29.
[34]Ibid.

authority in the schoolroom. Not present were the African-American students. Where were they? They were segregated into their own sub-standard schools. As Andrew Gulliford writes, "The myth of the little red schoolhouse and egalitarian education proved totally false for rural blacks, who were often lucky to have any schools in session at all."[35] And the Native Americans? Most of them were schooled on the reservations, or in special missionary schools. For the few who did attend the regular common school in their area, their treatment seems to have varied from teacher to teacher. Yet, even some textbooks presented a discriminatory view of them as "barbarian-like" with limited intellectual abilities.[36] The general homogeneity of most schools made it possible for parents, teachers, and students proudly to characterize their schoolhouse as democratic and egalitarian, while still ignoring large parts of the society.

The greatest threat to maintaining the facade of a homogeneous society was the presence of immigrants. As an 1851 article in *The Massachusetts Teacher* stated, "The constantly increasing influx of foreigners during the last ten years has been, and continues to be, a cause of serious alarm."[37] Negative attitudes toward the immigrants may have been largely overlooked by schoolchildren, but were prevalent in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century society.[38] Roxie Copenhaver went to one-room schools in southern Nevada after the turn of the century. Reflecting back on her education, she said, "At that time you never heard of [discrimination], didn't know what it was. I've always thought of the little school at Pahrump . . . we had Mexicans; we had

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[35]Gulliford, 104.

[36]Louise L. Stevenson, The Victorian Homefront: American Thought and Culture: 1860-1880 (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1991), 95.

[37]"Immigration," The Massachusetts Teacher 4 (October 1851), 289.

[38]Oscar and Lillian Hamlin, Liberty in Expansion: 1760-1850 (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1989), 302.

Indians; we had Chinese . . . had all these nationalities---this was certainly democracy working."[39]

In 1851, the cry, "America for the Americans" was heralded throughout the country in the movement more formally known as nativism. Trepidation grew in the hearts of many Americans who feared the result of unbridled immigration. At the end of the century, Francis W. Parker warned of the importance of socialization of immigrants: "If any people or sect, no matter what, comes to America, lives by itself, speaks its own language, refuses to learn the genius of American citizenship, it is weakness to all and, if not arrested, threatens destruction to all."[40]

The public school was seen as the answer to the "immigrant problem." In the preface to his book on New England education, published in 1908, William Mowry wrote:

> Nearly one-quarter of the population of the United States today are either foreign born or the children of foreigners. These people have come from all nations in all quarters of the globe, holding different views of law and government, of morals and social life, speaking different languages, and familiar chiefly with despotic and arbitrary governments. With these diverse notions coming into our great republic, liberty is in danger of degenerating into license. ***The public schools and our constantly broadening system of education are almost our only hope of making homogeneous this diverse population.*** (emphasis added)[41]

Francis Parker explained further in his speech "Democracy and the Common School": "The principal mission of the common school is to dissolve the prejudices that have been inculcated under the methods of oppression," and to

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[39]Dorothy Rankin, ed., Country School Legacy: Humanities on the Frontier (Silt, CO: Mountain Plains Library Association, 1981), 36.

[40]Francis W. Parker, "Democracy and the Common School," in Talks on Pedagogics (New York, 1894), 420-451, as reprinted in Annals of America (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1976), 109.

[41]William A. Mowry, Recollections of a New England Educator (New York: Arno Press and The New York Times, 1969), 4.

aid in the "building up of democracy by being the one place where children of all nations and sects can come together, sit upon the same benches, play upon the same grounds, live together, work together, [and] know each other."[42]

It was in the schoolroom, then, where the immigrant child faced the American, and the teacher faced a whole new set of challenges. Now, in addition to the nearly overwhelming demands of teaching eight grades in one room, the teacher had pupils who spoke little or no English. Each teacher's reaction varied. Some helped as best they could by staying late to give English lessons to immigrant parents and older children. Others were unwilling or unable to tackle this language barrier. Some teachers believed these immigrant children were not intellectually equal to the other students. Escolasticia Salazaar Martinez attended school in Huerfano County, Colorado in the nineteen-twenties. Her family spoke only Spanish at home, and Escolasticia faced prejudice from her teachers: "A lot of things I missed, I guess, because I didn't understand my teacher. It was rough. . . . I could memorize the stories in reading but they didn't have much meaning. They thought because you didn't know the English you were slow in learning."[43] Perhaps the most democratic place was actually the schoolyard, where students learned most of their English at recess and fought to gain the respect of their peers.

Thus, we see that despite the memories of former students who saw their schools as bastions of democratic values, teachers in one-room schools reflected the variety of attitudes common in the society at that time. Here is one case where the memories of the students do not reflect the full picture of what was going on inside the one-room schools. America still had progress to be

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[42]Parker, 109-110.

[43]Gulliford, 107.

made in the fair and democratic treatment of all races and cultures, including the immigrant, Native American, and African-American. We still do.

View from the Teachers

Thus far, the nostalgic memories have shown teachers in a favorable light, although limited by the students' perception. Through the journals and letters of the teachers themselves, we read of frustrations which were not evident to the students. By adding the perspectives of the teachers, we can see a clearer picture of teaching in the one-room school. This, from a former teacher in 1920's rural New York, gives a more frank assessment of teaching in a one-room school:

> Insufficient reading material for the grades taught . . . preparing older students for the Regents . . . no competition in the class . . . lack of equipment and supplies . . . trying to get through the work for all eight grades in a day . . . Some children so dirty and unkempt. . . Some very slow learners . . . students almost as old as I was . . . all drank from the same dipper . . . coping with a seriously ill child once in a while . . . Maintaining a fair relationship with all parents . . . No inside plumbing . . . keeping warm . . . . All that for $100 a month! ***But, do you know, teaching in a rural district was worth it.*** (emphasis added)[44]

Thinking back after forty or fifty years at a successful career as a teacher, it is easy to say it was "worth it," but would she have responded so positively at the end of a school week? Turning to the diaries and letters they wrote at the time of their teaching, we see another side of the teachers' daily life.

According to the few scant diary entries of a New England teacher in the nineteenth century, she faced several common problems: chronic tardiness, different readers, and homesickness, just to name a few. To combat the problem of chronic tardiness, this New England teacher decided on a creative solution:

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[44]Hillebrand, 120.

> I told the children to-night that I should read a story to all who would come to-morrow morning five minutes before school time. Many of them live so far from the school-house, they will be very likely to be late often, unless I provide some greater inducement to come early than their lessons will afford. I have made so many nice plans to assist them in their studies, they certainly ought to improve rapidly, and I think they will.[45]

Other teachers relied on school board members to visit the homes of the students and impress the parents with the necessity of getting their children to school---and on time.[46]

The young age of many of the teachers and the fact that this was likely their first experience of living away from family, made homesickness a natural reaction. The difficulties of travelling even a short distance could bring on feelings of isolation. The New England schoolteacher complained of having two students linger in the classroom while she was writing in her diary. She was near the point of tears from homesickness, "I cannot much longer repress these tears, and should they see me weep, what can I tell them? How ridiculous the idea! A school ma'am crying to go home." As she confided in her diary later, her mother gave reassuring comfort when she did return home that weekend: "She said she and father had expected that I would be home-sick; she reminded me that I am not yet sixteen, and had never been twenty-four hours from home before, without some of the family."[47] Even in the picture-perfect world of Laura Ingalls, as portrayed in her children's books, Laura suffered from homesickness. Her first teaching position, at age fifteen, found her lonesome and without companionship though only twelve miles from home.[48]

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[45]"Leaves From the Diary of a New England Schoolteacher," Arthur's Home Magazine, 1854, 141-145, in "Making One's Way: 19th Century Worklife," Garet Livermore and Celia Oliver, curators, Special Exhibit Program, unpublished, Shelburne Museum, Shelburne, VT.

[46]Ellis Ford Hartford, The Little White Schoolhouse (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1977), 4.

[47]Arthur's Home Magazine, 141-145.

[48]William Anderson, Laura Ingalls Wilder Country (New York: HarperPerennial, 1990), 72. Also, Phil Greetham, "The Story of Laura's Life; Letter from Laura to Schoolchildren." [Online] Available http://ourworld.compuserve.com/ homepage/p_greetham/letter.htm, 15 July 1997.

Sporadic attendance of students was also a source of concern, though it was more often mentioned by the reformers than by the teachers themselves. Perhaps the teachers understood this as "normal," being a product of the same rural society where labor was often required at home. In fact, some schools planned their academic calendar around the harvest times to avoid the conflict. According to the attendance record book for the Scuffletown (District No. 3) School in Twin Township, Ohio, the whole school was dismissed to go to the fair for two days.[49] The annual fair offered much in the way of rural education and exposure to things these children could see nowhere else. In this way, the rural school reflected the values and needs of the community of which it was a part. In the eyes of the school reformers, however, this was an error of improper priorities.[50]

According to Henry Barnard's observations, he found this situation "very unfavorable": "In not a single instance was the number of absentees at the time of my visit less than one fourth of the whole number of scholars enrolled."[51] While reformers like Barnard complained of the high rates of absence in the rural schools, historical studies show that there were actually more students attending school regularly in the rural areas than in the urban ones.[52] Historically speaking, we must judge them not by our standards today, but by their performance within the continuum of history. In that light, school attendance had increased greatly at the end of the nineteenth century, and was

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[49]Standard Register of Attendance and Deportment (Cincinnati: Van Antwerp, Bragg, and Co., 1881), Attendance register used by District School No. 3, Twin Township, OH, 1888, Public School Files, Preble Country Historical Society, Eaton, OH.

[50]Kaestle, Pillars, 105.

[51]As quoted in Michael B. Katz, School Reform: Past and Present (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1971), 10.

[52] Carl Kaestle and Martha Coons, Education and Social Change in Nineteenth-century Massachusetts (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 136.

continuing on the rise well into the twentieth.[53] Compulsory education was still a new concept for many states. The first state to adopt mandatory education laws was Massachusetts in 1852; the last state to adopt them was Mississippi in 1918.[54] As late as 1871, only eight states had passed the compulsory education laws.[55] Farms were labor-intensive, requiring the assistance of the children during harvest times especially. While school was important, so was the farmer's task of putting food on the table for his family. In fact, without compulsory education laws, one wonders what our attendance records would show in schools today!

In the poorer rural areas, teachers often had to cope with several different versions of textbooks. Families relied on being able to pass the readers down from one child to the next as they grew out of them, just like clothes. The New England schoolteacher confided in her diary, "I was somewhat troubled by the multiplicity of books, but I must learn to make the best of such trifling disadvantages. My twenty-three scholars brought six different kinds of reading books."[56]

Reformers record long lists of abuses of teachers in the field pointing to the lack of training, the ineptitude of many teachers, and the lack of professionalism.[57] Historically speaking, the career of teaching was only beginning to be recognized as a true profession in the last quarter of the

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[53]Lawrence A. Cremin, Traditions of American Education (New York: Basic Books, 1977), 69; and Kaestle, Pillars, 110.

[54]John H. Westerhoff III, McGuffey and His Readers: Piety, Morality, and Education in 19th Century America (Nashville: Parthenon Press, 1978), 22.

[55]Robert H. Wiebe, The Search for Order: 1877-1920 (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), 119.

[56]Arthur's Home Magazine, n.p.

[57]Joel Spring, The American School: 1642-1985: Varieties of Historical Interpretation of the Foundations and Development of American Education (New York: Longman, Inc., 1986), 117; and James G. Carter, Essays on Popular Education (Boston: Dutton and Wentworth, 1826), 34-37, 40-41, as reprinted in David B. Tyack, ed., Turning Points in American Educational History, (Walthan, MA: Blaisdell Publishing Co., 1967), 151-152.

nineteenth century. This process was awakening the public to the need for better-trained and higher caliber teachers. Certainly not all teachers suffered from the faults the reformers charged against them. In fact, many individual teachers had much more skill and sensitivity than was acknowledged by critical school reformers. Later Progressive reformers would call upon teachers to change their way of teaching to a more child-centered outlook. "Teachers will inspire a desire for knowledge and will serve as guides in the investigations undertaken, rather than taskmasters."[58] It seems, however, that many teachers pre-empted that call and were sensitive to children's needs long before they were asked to be.[59]

In sum, whatever made all the difficulties "worth it" for Lois Hoagland Evendon must have also made it worthwhile to many country school teachers across the nation as they faced nearly overwhelming obstacles to teaching. For countless others, however, the obstacles were insurmountable. In a historical analysis of the teachers who went West to teach, Polly Kaufman finds that only two thirds of those remained in the field of teaching after their initial assignment.[60] This percentage is not solely due to the liabilities of the profession but also to the appeal of marriage that usually meant the teacher had to give up her contract.

Apparently, the role of the one-room school teacher was far from being as congenial or as effortless as the nostalgic memories lead us to believe. And yet,

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[58]Lawrence A. Cremin, The Transformation of the School: Progressivism in American Education 1876-1957 (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968), reprinted in Annals of America 14, 45.

[59]Sources for this are numerous. For several actual examples, see Madelyn Holmes and Beverly J. Weiss, Lives of Women Public School Teachers: Scenes from American Educational History (New York: Garland Publishing Co., 1995), 144-145ff.

[60]Polly Kaufman, Women Teachers on the Frontier (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 228.

it must have also been rewarding for at least some teachers who, faced with such difficulties as we have enumerated, still served for years, and affected many lives of the past generation of Americans.

CHAPTER V
MEMORIES OF LESSONS

Dean McNames received his one-room school education in Northern California in the 1920's. He found it a positive experience: "I have often been amazed at how good the basics were implanted in very thick and stubborn heads. I eventually got a Masters degree and I believe I found it relatively easy because of those fundamental three R's that I got at Excelsior School."[61] In fifty years, I can only hope that my students remember the lessons I taught them as well and as fondly as the former country school students do. Their reminiscences rarely miss including the recitations, spelling bees, and the moral content of the lessons. Here, in the schoolhouses of old, there were two separate types of lessons being taught: the academic ones and the moral/social ones.

A Report Card on Academic Lessons

On the academic level, how did one-room schools fare? We might ask, how did the rural school students feel about their preparation as they entered the city or town high school? Did they feel an academic disadvantage over the students who had been attending graded, consolidated city schools? In most cases, former students acknowledge an effective preparation in the country school. Jeanette Sodergren, who attended a rural school on the Eastern Shore

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[61]Miller, 58.

of Maryland (1907-1914), recalls, "When I entered high school in town, I didn't feel at all handicapped because of my preparation in a one-room school."[62] Kathryn Brown Hubbard appreciated her one-room school preparation, "I went to the Ellenville High School in 1923, where I boarded with a family, returning home weekends. The transition was a new and bewildering experience for a country child but thanks to the good teachers I had in the one-room school, I was able to compete."[63] Peg Manuel found herself so far ahead once she moved to the high school in Cook County, Illinois, that she remembers "being bored because I had done most of the math and English, so I . . . read *Ben Hur* in class."[64]

Despite these memories of an easy transition, I imagine there must have been some difficulties or gaps in learning, just as there are when students transfer from one district to another today. Perhaps it was a source of self-esteem and pride for the former country school graduates to feel academically equal to the town children. No one wants to remember being left behind or struggling and doing poorly in school. This may account for the preponderance of positive recollections.

Then, I met Charles. Charles Antholt was cycling across the United States when he stopped for the night at Burke Lake Campground. In our conversation, it came up that he had gone to a one-room school in West Virginia through eighth grade. At first he seemed to shy away from talking about it, as if he was a bit embarrassed by the "backwoods" association of having gone to a rural, one-room school instead of a flashy, modern, high-tech school. Here he was, a very successful man, having just retired from twenty years in the State Department Foreign Service. He has traveled the world many times and is

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[62]Sodergren, interview.

[63]Kathryn Brown Hubbard, "Reflections," The Accord 3, no.2, (April 1989).

[64]Peg Manuel, interview.

widely published and well-respected in his field of specialized agricultural research and development. Obviously his rural roots did not hold him back. However, he lamented not being able to advance in mathematics due to limitations on the part of his teacher. This proved a disability once he got to the town high school; it took him four years to "catch up." However, this was really his only regret, because, in his judgment, there was "not a better place to learn" than the one-room school. There you get all the basics and the camaraderie and community spirit you need, he said.[65] No doubt there were others like Charles, however, who felt a discernible limit to their progress in the one-room school.

Students often comment on the benefit of being able to listen to other recitations to extend and reinforce their own learning. It was the most frequent observation made by respondents about academic issues. Bill May, former student at a one-room school in Colorado, remarked, "By having the chance to hear older students recite (after their own assignment was completed), it was not uncommon for children in the fifth or sixth grade (and sometimes even younger) to have mastered practically everything presented to the seventh and eighth grades."[66] Charles Myers attended Newman School in Illinois in the early 1920's. As he reflected about the experience, he recalled: "We gained a lot of knowledge not only by studying our own lessons but also listening to other classes."[67] Crystal Wilson was entranced by the opportunity to hear the older students' lessons at Greenview School, Siskiyou County, California in 1918: "My world expanded unbelievably every day. For the first time, I became aware of the wealth and variety of interesting and challenging studies that lay ahead of

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[65]Charles Antholt, personal interview with author, Burke, VA, 11 June 1997.

[66]As quoted in Gulliford, 48.

[67]Charles Myers, written interview with author, Carmi, IL, 14 February 1997.

me and [I have] never lost that sense of wonder."[68] It is amazing to hear how positively they recall that experience. I am not sure my students, or I, would have the kind of long attention span and concentration you would need in the one-room school environment.

Another teaching method commonly remembered was peer-tutoring. Floyd Cocking taught at Pringle School in Custer County. His story is told in the *Memoirs of South Dakota Retired Teachers*:

> One of my seventh grade girls was pretty sharp and I had to hustle to keep her busy and challenged. And then I found the solution. Two of my fifth graders seemed to need more personal help than I had time to give so I had Anne start helping them. Within a week, she was my full-fledged teacher aide during parts of the day. She loved it. So did I. And everyone profited from it. Of course, she did not get paid. But she got a better education.[69]

Mr. Cocking was not the only one to "discover" the wealth of teaching potential in the older students. A school of thirty pupils could mean more than fifty different individual lessons for the teacher to prepare and teach. Peer-tutoring was the only natural choice. What was then employed as necessity has become a popular teaching technique in today's classrooms.

Many references to the academic lessons in a country school also point out the need to be self-disciplined and learn on your own. Peg Manuel remembers being "taught independent work habits, as well as cooperation" in the rural school she attended in the late 1940's.[70] The aptitude for independent learning undoubtedly varied from one student to the next; but the small school environment certainly demanded it. We can conclude, then, that the learning

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[68]Miller, 106.

[69]Rankin, 16.

[70]Peg Manuel, interview.

experience of students in the one-room school setting was based on two factors: the teacher's skill and the students' effort, not unlike today.

Reformers' Critique of Academic Lessons

Reformers were quick to criticize the lessons being taught at the rural schools. They focused on the use of rote memorization in the classroom.[71] One reformer from New York wrote:

> To teach the child *book grammar* is nothing; to teach him by example, by practice, by thoroughly clarifying the principles of correct syntax, *how to talk and write harmoniously*, is everything. . . . Mere geography is a sham, too, unless the learner have the position of places in his mind, and *know* the direction, distances, bearings, etc., of the countries, seas, cities, rivers and mountains, whose names (as our miserable school geographies give them) he runs over so glibly.[72]

The following observation by William James, a contemporary of John Dewey and the Progressive education campaign in the early twentieth century, clearly shows the hindrance of rote memorization:

> A friend of mine, visiting a school, was asked to examine a young class in geography. Glancing at the book she said: "Suppose you should dig a hole in the ground, hundreds of feet deep, how should you find it at the bottom---warmer or colder than on top?" None of the class replying, the teacher said: "I'm sure they know, but I think you didn't ask the question quite rightly. Let me try." So taking the book, she asked: "In what condition is the interior of the globe?" and received the immediate answer from half the class at once: "The interior of the globe is in a state of igneous fusion."[73]

The students in this class had simply memorized the text, but had not internalized the information. Under the earlier definition of education, this

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[71]For a discussion of the benefits of memorization on intellectual development, see Clara Claiborne Park, "The Mother of the Muses: In Praise of Memory," in The Anatomy of Memory: An Anthology, James McConkey, ed. (New York: Oxford Universtiy Press, 1996), 186.

[72]Tyack,166.

[73]Paul Theobald, Call School: Rural Education in the Midwest to 1918 (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1995), 161.

display would have aptly demonstrated the capabilities of the teacher; however, the definition of education was being broadened to be more pragmatic by those with a more reformed vision of education.[74]

By looking deeper into the content of the curriculum and tests, we can see that there was actually more innovative education going on than the reformers conceded. Other primary sources also indicate that more than superficial learning was taking place in the rural schools. In order to compare the relative learning experiences of students seventy-five years ago with those of today, I made several observations and ran an experiment involving current and historical test data.

Experiment: Comparing Historical Tests

We like to pride ourselves, as educators today, on teaching more than "just facts." So, I made a careful examination of the history department's final cumulative exam at my school, Hayfield Secondary School in Alexandria, Virginia. I found approximately eighty-five percent of the questions were fact-based, asking the students to simply recall facts they had learned in the course. After more research, it became clear that the basic knowledge we require of our 1997 seventh graders is significantly less than that required of the 1922 students. For example, a test given in Rush County, Kansas (where the majority

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[74]Interestingly enough, this is the exact mode of education I observed in Kazakstan, former Soviet Republic, where I was teaching English language methodology to public school teachers in June, 1996. In the English class I observed, the students put on a demonstration of their skills which was quite impressive. They repeated a dialogue from the textbook describing a pet dog. However, when I questioned them about their own pets, they could not tranfer the information and make it personal. They were limited to only what was printed in the textbook directly. Indeed, when I asked the teachers about this, they did not see any reason for the students to converse freely outside of the bounds of the prescribed text. This fit with the general trend of education methods and technology which we observed to be approximately fifty years behind our current practice.

of students were educated in rural one-room schools) included the following question about the territorial expansion of the United States:

> Beginning with the original territory as granted by the Treaty of Paris, at the close of the Revolutionary War, make an outline that shows all the territorial acquisitions up to the present time (1920's). Give the time of acquisition, the source from which the territory came, and the cost, if purchased.[75]

While this question seems straight-forward, it does require more knowledge than the question which appeared on our seventh grade history final examination:

> Using the map above which shows the main territorial acquisitions in the U.S., choose from the list the appropriate name of each acquisition.[76]

No dates, island acquisitions, sources, or costs are necessary to answer this question; a student is merely asked to select his responses from a prepared list of the correct answers.

In order to further ascertain the breadth of knowledge a 1922 student was exposed to, I conducted an experiment on my 120 students at the end of the 1996-97 school year. They took a copy of the exact test their counterparts took in 1922 in fourth through eighth grades inclusive. My students were given unlimited time to finish, and were encouraged not to randomly guess if they honestly did not know the answer. The results of this test sample cannot be directly compared to the 1922 results since those test scores are not available.[77] Still, it is interesting to make some general comparisons. Overall, my students did poorly on any section of the test except the easiest questions (designed for

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[75]William Casey, "Pit Your Wits Against a 1920's Eighth-Grader," Washington Post, 25 May 1997, sec. C, p. 4.

[76]Hayfield Secondary School History Department, Seventh Grade U.S. History Final Examination, 1997.

[77]Stanford Achievement Test, Grades 4-8, 1922, Typescript copy, Public School Files, Preble County Historical Society, Eaton, OH.

the fourth and fifth grades).[78] Their difficulties with the rest of the questions stemmed from several factors that I analyzed in correcting their tests:

1. ***Reluctance to think in order to come up with the answers themselves.*** Many students simply refused to do that part of the test since they were totally baffled by the lack of a word bank.[79]
2. ***Unfamiliarity with certain words which are archaic or less common.*** For example, the question about the use of a ***plane*** refers to the tool used in the woodshop. Today's students could not decipher that question, since they were interpreting ***plane*** to mean an airplane.
3. ***Level of vocabulary.*** The vocabulary used in the test was of a higher level than seventh graders today use.
4. ***Exposure to a more narrow scope of literature and Biblical knowledge than their 1922 counterparts.*** The students who did have some Biblical literacy tended to answer all those questions correctly, and those with no exposure to the *Bible* missed all of those questions. This reflects the complete separation between church and state today. In the common school, certain Biblical knowledge was part of the core curriculum. Also, much of the literature referenced on the test is not covered until high school today. Interestingly, Roman and Greek mythology represented a significant portion of the test, reflecting a stronger emphasis in the curriculum than those subjects generally receive today.
5. ***Unfamiliarity with agricultural terms and information.*** The students today are not exposed to agriculture and have a surprisingly limited

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[78]There were three rather exceptional students who marked much higher than the rest of the classes.

[79]Granted, they also knew this sample testing was not going to reflect upon their final grade in my course. Sadly, this has a definite effect on how hard they try on any particular assignment. I tried to minimize this effect as much as possible.

understanding of plants and nature. The newly designed Virginia Standards of Learning tests (to be given in 1998) have a section on technology which would be the corresponding field of study for today's youth. It is similar to agriculture in its applicability to the work force they will be entering.

The subjects of the 1922 Stanford Achievement Tests were English, history, literature, science and nature, and mathematics. Overall, the knowledge-base tested in these subjects was broader than that expected of students today. The purpose of this experiment was not to say which of the students was smarter or had a better education, but to warn us against drawing conclusions too nonchalantly about the quality of education in the one-room schools.

It would obviously be a mistake to compare the methodologies of the nineteenth-century teacher with those we use today, as we have benefited from a century of advancement and study in educational principles and methods. Ironically, however, we find ourselves facing some of the same issues again. What may appear as linear advancements since the beginning of the twentieth century might actually prove to be a cyclical progression as we find ourselves debating analogous topics in education today. Indeed, there is a strong movement favoring the return to memorization of facts. One need look no further than the newly proposed set of *Virginia State Standards of Learning for History and the Social Sciences* (State Board of Education, 1997) to see this transition away from experiential teaching back to a standard set of basic facts to memorize. More surprisingly, the *Virginia Standards* are now being considered

for adoption in twelve other states, marking them as the "new" cutting-edge educational philosophy.[80]

Spelling Bees

In addition to rote memorization, school reformers also criticized America's favorite pastime in schools all across America every Friday afternoon: SPELLING BEES! My research clearly shows that spelling bees were indeed a nationwide obsession in the nineteenth century. So central and universal were they to the education in the country schools, that they figure prominently in Edward Eggleston's popular novel *The Hoosier Schoolmaster*, a general study of the life of a schoolmaster in the early 1800's. To "spell down" one's opponent won you the highest admiration. Laura Ingalls could hardly believe that her Pa had just "spelled down" the entire town of De Smet, South Dakota![81] In fact, the name of the spelling bee winner was often recorded in a town's local history, reported in the newspapers, and recalled by the classmates years later. James Cooley of Willow Creek, California went to school at the turn of the century. His memoirs record:

> The main public events, in addition to an occasional dance at the schoolhouse, were the spelling bees. Milt Richardson and John Cooley were the first to be called when sides were chosen and were usually the last to be spelled down. People came many miles for these events, and the newspaper reporters were invited to attend.[82]

"Spelling down" your opponents was not without its risks, however, as John Greenleaf Whittier's famous poem *In School Days* tells of a young, pretty girl

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[80]Mike Wildasin, personal interview with author, Fairfax County Social Studies Curriculum Coordinator, Hayfield Secondary School, Alexandria, VA, 2 June 1997.

[81]Laura Ingalls Wilder, Little Town on the Prairie (Harper Trophy, 1971) in Anderson, Laura Ingalls Wilder Country, 64.

[82]Miller, 38.

who "spells down" the boy she likes, and then apologizes for "going above" him.[83]

Nostalgic remembrances focus on the pleasure of the competition and the highly sought rewards it brought, but they say little about the educational worth of such an exercise. Today, we criticize the teaching of spelling out of context, believing it better to learn both the spelling of the word and its meaning together. Indeed, reformers were also quick to criticize the relative uselessness of these spelling exercises. Henry Barnard's *Third Annual Report* instructed:

> Spelling, instead of being confined as it too generally is, to a mere repetition of long columns of words, no matter on what principle they are arranged, should be taught, to some extent at least, in connection with reading and writing, otherwise it becomes of little practical use.[84]

The reformers certainly had a valid point; however, pure memorization of spelling was very typical of the time, and had been for many generations. Indeed, when Noah Webster wrote his famous *Elementary Spelling Book* (1855), known as the "Blue-Back Speller" by millions of schoolchildren, he failed to include any definitions for the words. Even the spelling bees held today do not incorporate the definitions. At Hayfield Secondary, where I teach, all students are put in the auditorium to listen to about thirty of their peers spell words ad nauseam for two hours. This event brings hosts of yawns and misbehavior since the students in the audience find it dreadfully boring. After all, they question the purpose of even learning to spell, when they can rely on the spell-check on their computers.

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[83]Hazel Felleman, The Best Loved Poems of the American People (Garden City, NY: Garden City Books, 1936), 416-417.

[84]Henry Barnard, Third Annual Report As Secretary of the Board of Education of Connecticut (Hartford: State of Connecticut, 1841) as reprinted in The American Curriculum: A Documentary History George Willis, et. al. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1993), 37.

The one value of the rural spelling contests and the Friday night literaries which educational critics overlooked was the social value. According to the memoirs, these events were well attended by nearly everyone in the community, whether or not they had a child at the school.[85] Shopkeepers even closed their stores in De Smet, South Dakota to attend the literary at the schoolhouse.[86] This was the weekly occasion for socializing in a rural setting that had few other opportunities for getting together with your neighbors. Even travelers in the West noted that people seemed "avid for excuses to get together at executions, elections, weddings, [and] spelling bees."[87] Writing for a local newspaper in January, 1919, Laura Ingalls Wilder made a case for bringing back the Friday night literaries, complete with spelling contests:

> There is one social affair, which used to belong to country life, that I would like to see come back again. That is the old-fashioned Friday night literary at the schoolhouse. You older people who used to attend them, did you ever enjoy yourselves better anywhere?. . . Well, the debate is finished, and it is time for the spelling-down match. How earnestly we used to line up for the struggle and valiantly contest for the honor of remaining longest on the floor, and how we used to laugh when some small schoolchild spelled down an outsider who had forgotten the lessons in the old spelling book.[88]

As was the case for much of the country school experience, the worth of the activity was more than just the educational aspect. The Friday night spelling bees were important community events with widespread participation. Sometimes districts would compete with each other for the coveted title of having the top speller; it was a source of civic pride to have the top speller or debater in your school. The reformers might have criticized its educational value;

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[85]Ed Manuel, written interview with author, Fredericksburg, VA, 17 February 1997; and Mrs. Homer Beck, written interview with author, Carmi, IL, 13 February 1997.

[86]Wilder, 213.

[87]Hamlin, 261.

[88]Hines, Stephen W., ed. Little House in the Ozarks: A Laura Ingalls Wilder Sampler: The Rediscovered Writings (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1991), 149-150.

nevertheless, the greatest value for the country school was in building its sense of community.

Moral and Social Lessons

A belief that the purpose of education was to teach moral and civil responsibilities was widely held even before the nineteenth century.[89] The Northwest Ordinance had prescribed the role of education in the Northwestern states in 1787: "Religion, morality, and knowledge, being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall be forever encouraged."[90] It was assumed that students who learned the right morals and behavior at school would become productive and informed citizens of the Republic, having "internalized the necessary character traits for success in adulthood."[91] Jefferson stated this belief in the eighteenth century: "self-government is a chimera in the absence of universal education."[92] Daniel Webster's speeches carried Jefferson's idea into the nineteenth century, stressing the need of universal public education in order to have a well-functioning democracy and a moral society. He explained:

> By general instruction, we seek, as far as possible, to purify the whole moral atmosphere . . . that, by the diffusion of general knowledge and good and virtuous sentiments, the political fabric may be secure as well

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[89]Paul H. Mattingly, "American Schoolteachers Before and After the Northwest Ordinance," in Schools and the Means of Education Shall Forever Be Encouraged: A History of Education in the Old Northwest: 1787-1880 (Athens, OH: Ohio University Library, 1987), 45-50; and Richard Hofstadter, Anti-intellectualism in American Life (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1979), 307.

[90]Isidore Starr, Lewis Paul Todd, and Merle Curti, eds. Living American Documents (Sacramento: California State Department of Education, 1967), 72.

[91] David Nasau, Schooled to Order: A Social History of Public Schools in the United States (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 23.

[92]Lawrence Cremin, American Education: The National Experience: 1783-1876 (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 23.

> against open violence and overthrow, as against the slow, but sure, undermining of licentiousness.[93]

In 1898, Francis W. Parker carried the torch further into the century, citing the primary importance of morals in education with a firm foundation in God:

> I believe that no teaching is worthy the name if it does not have a moral and ethical end. There are only two things to study, man and nature; there is only one thing to study and that is the Creator of man and nature, God. The study of God's truth and the application of His truth are the highest glory of man. Herein lies the path and the goal of education.[94]

The religious grounding for a system of morals was crucial in the eyes of Josiah Strong as well, "because immorality is perilous to the State, and morality cannot be secured without the sanctions of religion."[95] This was the least controversial point between the supporters of the country schools and their critics: moral education held an indisputable place in the school.

Memories of Moral and Social Lessons

Memories of schoolhouse lessons often focus on the ethical virtues taught and modeled there. Charles Myers still remembers the values taught at Newman School (1921-1929; Carmi, Illinois): "Teachers demanded honesty, fairness, and respect from and among all students. Those qualities have and will remain with most students throughout their lives."[96] Marilyn Seward described the curriculum at her Quartz Valley School in 1930, saying it included a "healthy segment of memory work and specific instruction in morals and manners."[97]

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[93]Webster, Senator Daniel. Works (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1854), I, 41-42, as reprinted in Tyack.

[94]Ossian H. Lang, ed., Educational Creeds of the Nineteenth Century (New York: 1898), 54-56, as reprinted in Annals of America 12.

[95]As quoted in Wiebe, 57.

[96]Myers, interview.

[97]Miller, 138.

Textbooks gave clear directions toward the path of virtue and respect. One hundred, twenty-two million copies of McGuffey's *Reader* eventually saturated the classrooms of America with their moralistic message.[98] The *Readers* gave children clear examples of the rewards of a virtuous life and the toll of a life lived apart from those virtues of patriotism, honesty, kindness, thriftiness, courage, and hard work. For example, children read the story about James Bland in "The Kind Boy" who cares for a hurt young bird until it is able to fly again; then, by setting it free, he becomes an example to all by his kindness.[99] Mrs. Anna Kramer, from Twin Township, Ohio, recollected her late nineteenth-century schooling:

> We were taught out of the good, old McGuffey books, with the Golden Rule principles. We can look back with pride to have been one of the little Red Brick School scholars of District No. 3, of Brennersville, Ohio. Boys and girls going out in life making good---good parents, good neighbors, good teachers, good preachers in our good old America.[100]

Proper social ethics and values training played a dominant role in the curriculum of the one-room school.

The most visible moral lesson walked in the teacher's shoes. Maurene Rietz remembers the role of her teachers as models of virtue in the Illinois where she attended school from 1921-1929: "Their activities away from school became a standard that was watched. A teacher became a person you would like to follow in later life."[101] Horace Mann called upon school board members to be "sentinels stationed at the door of every schoolhouse in the state to see that no

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[98]Daniel Boorstin, The Americans: The Democratic Experience (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 463.

[99]W. H. McGuffey, Eclectic First Reader (Cincinnati: Truman and Smith, 1836), 32 in Westerhoff, 99.

[100]Anna Kramer, My Story of Recollections of My Home, Observations in the School, My Teachers, and Old Industries of District Number 3 , unpublished leaflet, Twin Township Folder, Preble County Historical Society, Eaton, OH.

[101]Maurene Rietz, written interview with author, 14 February 1997, Carmi, IL.

teacher ever crosses its threshold who is not clothed, from the crown of his head to the sole of his feet, in garments of virtue . . . ."[102]

Right virtues included patriotism. As Henry Barnard encouraged, "Let us have more of . . . the ennobling perceptions of moral beauty and virtue, and the daily practice of . . . patriotism, and we shall be a healthier and a happier people."[103] Progressive education, increased immigration, World War I, and later World War II propelled the ardent teaching of patriotism into America's classrooms. Mrs. Anna Kramer, as quoted earlier, spoke with pride of her classmates who were now taking the right principles they learned at the Red Brick School and "answering the call of our Country's need; to help make the world a better place to live."[104] She was speaking in 1943 of those who had gone to World War II to "make the world safe for democracy." Patriotism translated into more than just songs and flags. In Rochester, New York, students collected milkweed pods because the down was used in life preservers for the military during World War I.[105]

Students recall the pride of raising the flag and singing patriotic songs around the flagpole. Elma Bittle, teaching in Preble County, Ohio in 1890, proudly boasted of her school's new flag in a letter to her sister: "Friday last we raised a flag with appropriate exercises. It is the second flag in the county."[106] Mae F. Hardin (Royal School #1, Starkweather, North Dakota, 1924-1930) still remembers the patriotic lessons she learned:

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[102]Horace Mann, Annual Reports of the Secretary of the Board of Education of Massachusetts for the Years 1839-1844 (Boston: State of Massachusetts, 1891), 53-91, as reprinted in Annals of America 6, 560.

[103]Edith Nye MacMullen, In the Cause of True Education: Henry Barnard and 19th Century School Reform (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 311.

[104]Kramer, unpublished leaflet.

[105]Decker, n.p.

[106]Elma Bittle, to her sister, Mary, November 1890, West Elkton, OH, transcript in Public School Files, Preble County Historical Society, Eaton, OH.

Cartes de visite **of Elma Bittle as a teacher.**
Original is in the Elma Bittle Papers at the Preble Co. Historical Society, Eaton, Ohio.

> One of the things I remember best was the flag. It was special to all of us. The school day started with the pledge to the flag. It was a special privilege to put up the flag in the morning. At the first drop of rain on the window, hands were raised and waved frantically, with the cry of, "Teacher, teacher, it's raining." Teacher would immediately send someone out to take down the flag. It was never allowed to stay out in a storm, and I still cringe when I see flags drooping, neglected in the rain.[107]

Patriotism was overtly taught and outwardly displayed in the one-room school. For the most part, it seems these lessons were well-learned and remembered.

Reforming the Curriculum

Although early reformers like Henry Barnard and Horace Mann criticized country schools during the 1840's and 50's, some of the conditions they cited remained concerns throughout that century. Henry Barnard was one of the first reformers who worked to further the cause of practical education until his retirement from the Connecticut Board of Education in 1870. In his *First Annual Report* (1839), he stated:

> I have made these brief suggestions because I think the condition of education in our country schools demands it. The course of instruction there will be radically defective, unless it embraces the harmonious development of whole nature of the child . . . and till it shall all end in a preparation for the real business of life---not for any particular pursuit, but for any and every pursuit.[108]

By his *Third Annual Report*, Barnard was still finding an impractical curriculum being taught in the schools. He argued that writing was not being taught "in any way, as to enable many of the graduates of the district schools to put their thoughts into the form of a business or friendly letter rapidly, legibly, and

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[107]Falk, 8.

[108]Henry Barnard, First Annual Report As Secretary of the Board of Education of Connecticut (Hartford: State of Connecticut, 1839), as reprinted in Willis, n.p.

grammatically."[109] At least one historian, however, finds that Barnard never reached the teachers with his message about reforms; his writings were too lofty and inaccessible to them. Still, he is remembered for introducing higher standards into the field of education and helping build the profession of teaching.[110]

Horace Mann complained of similar conditions in the Massachusetts schools of the 1830's. He lamented the impracticality of a young lady's education. According to Mann, she was studying rhetoric and analyzing Greek speeches, yet "she does not know that the fumes of burning coal will destroy life; and thinks, because she swallows her food and inhales her breath through her neck, that they both pass on to one common cavity in the chest, and hence concludes that respiration and digestion are functions of the same organ."[111] Mann continues:

> Is there a single department in the vast range of secular knowledge, more fundamental, more useful for increasing our ability to perform the arduous duties and to bear the inevitable burdens of life, more astonishing for the wonders it reveals, or better fitted to enforce upon us a lively conviction of the wisdom and goodness of God, than a study of our physical frame. . . ?[112]

This movement to bring practicality to education was begun by Barnard and Mann and others in the first half of the nineteenth century, and was carried into the twentieth century on the wings of progressive reform. By 1876, the NEA Report commends common schools for their introduction of the sciences of man and nature into their curriculum.[113]

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[109]Barnard, Third Annual Report, as reprinted in Willis, 37.

[110]MacMullen, 326-327.

[111]Horace Mann, Sixth Annual Report as Secretary of the Board of Education of Massachusetts (Boston: State of Massachusetts, 1842), as reprinted in Willis, 45-46.

[112]Ibid.

[113]Journal of Addresses and Proceedings of the National Education Association (Washington, D.C.: NEA, 1876), 58-68 in Willis, 73-77.

As the nineteenth century was drawing to a close, the new call for Progressive education rang out across the land in rural and urban schools alike. John Dewey was the major spokesperson; his ideas furthered the movement toward a more practical education in which the child's personal growth was tantamount to all other concerns. These sweeping changes in education brought job-related skills, laboratories, physical education, home economics, and more agricultural science into the schools. In 1904 the Women's Christian Temperance Union of Ohio lobbied the state government to mandate the introduction of physical education into the schools.[114]

One of the most widely accepted progressive reforms was the overt addition of nature study into the classrooms of both rural and urban schools. This example provides a case study on the changing curriculum and its effects on the one-room school. Here we will see how the country schools were not static institutions, but rather reflective of the changes and needs of society at that time.

Case Study: Nature Lessons

No part of the students' experience in one-room schools seems to be as picturesquely described as their encounters with nature. The smell of fresh blueberries still sends Jeanette Sodergren, at age ninety-seven, back to the one-room school she attended on the Eastern Shore of Maryland in 1907: "The school was located in a lovely pine grove where there was lots of room to play and enjoy nature. In the springtime, there was the lovely, sweet-smelling running arbutus, wild roses and other woodland flowers. Blueberries, grapes,

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[114]Kathryn Kish Sklar, "Female Teachers: 'Firm Pillars' of the West," Mattingly and Stevens, Jr., 65.

and little red teaberries were often eaten before they were fully ripe."[115] One former student from Preble County, Ohio fondly recalls how each autumn his teacher Chester Lephart would "take all the students across the road to John Locke's woods to gather nuts and bittersweet. In spring [we went] to the woods for wildflowers and mushrooms, which he prepared on the kerosene stove, [and] served them on tablet paper. Simple but delicious."[116] Students of the common schools often tell stories such as these of their explorations through the woods or fields surrounding the schoolhouse.

Some teachers took advantage of the rich laboratory for natural sciences just outside the schoolhouse door. Elwood Hoy has never forgotten his teacher, Mr. Keefer, at the district school in rural Pennsylvania (attended 1927-1938) who "would take us on hikes to the mountain and fields and would explain what different plants were, [which] were edible, and also look for arrowheads, etc. I think things like that build character."[117] Perhaps even more important than the lessons on trees and birds were the encouragements to students to open their eyes and truly see their world around them. Many rural school teachers instinctively followed the "Principles of Progressive Education" long before it was published in 1919: "Progressive teachers will encourage the use of all the senses, training the pupils in both observation and judgment."[118]

Students who had innovative teachers like this were fortunate. A clear, sunny day would sometimes encourage teachers to abandon the afternoon's lesson plan in favor of a hike in the woods or nearby fields. Peg Manuel (1940's, Illinois) remembers when the lure of a nature excursion outweighed the draw of the classroom, even without the teacher's approval:

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[115]Sodergren, interview.

[116]Hiestand, 89-90.

[117] Elwood Hoy, written interview with author, Alexandria, VA, 15 March 1997.

[118]Cremin, 243-245 in Annals of America 14, 45.

> One fine spring day in Illinois, my friends and I determined at afternoon recess that a walk to a nearby brook was in order. On arrival, we went wading, rock collecting, and decided it was too nice to return to class. We played HOOKY! When we got back to school in time to go home, Miss Ostdich was waiting. She explained that we would have to forego the next week's afternoon recess period because we had already used the time all up. And, that in the future, we could invite her and then we all could have a pleasant experience. I felt extremely guilty about not considering her feelings, and I suppose the rest of the class also did.[119]

By encouraging the wonder of nature in a child, the one-room school was girding that young individual with the truths of the land, and the values of the rural community . . . or was it? The nostalgic memories seem to say so. It becomes very easy to connect an appreciation of nature with an agricultural way of life, however, history has a different story to tell.

The Historical Side of the Story

Agricultural history paints a bleak picture of the farmer's plight in the late nineteenth century. Historical sources tell us of overproduction and declining prices.[120] The need to make a profit, and the difficulty therein, compelled the farmers to forsake the needs of the land. Instead, land and nature were seen as fodder to fuel household needs and desires. Every farmer's wife wanted the modern conveniences available in town such as a kitchen sink and other appliances to make a difficult life somewhat easier.[121] The farmers themselves were going deep into debt to buy the new, improved farming equipment.[122]

Our country was now becoming increasingly urban. The old, rural roots of America were being overtaken by the new urban-industrialization. "The sudden

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[119]Peg Manuel, interview.

[120]Walter Ebeling, The Fruited Plain: The Story of American Agriculture (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 161-162.

[121]Hines, 174-177.

[122] Ebeling, 90-92.

appearance of the Machine in the Garden deeply stirred an age already sensitive to the conflict between civilization and nature."[123] Although Leo Marx spoke of the earlier half of the century, this sensitivity to the struggle of the machine world versus the agrarian world was all the more poignant and pervasive by the end of the nineteenth century.[124]

This undermining of America's rich rural past worried many politicians, urban Progressives, and education reformers. The rural roots of America were seen as necessary support for the growth of cities and the health of the nation both economically and morally.[125] Even in the country schools, it was reported that "no more notice was taken of the beauty and instruction afforded by adjacent nature than if the pupils inhabited the grimmest urban landscape. It was as though country towns had fallen into a long, debilitating slumber."[126] All of these images put fear into the hearts of many Americans.

This fear prompted Theodore Roosevelt to establish the Country Life Commission in 1908 specifically to study the problems in the countryside: "How can the life of the farm family be made less solitary, fuller of opportunity, freer from drudgery, more comfortable, happier, and more attractive?"[127] While much of the Commission's work involved scientific farming advancements to make agriculture more profitable, the main focus of the Commission was on the rural educational system.

At least one social reformer noted that the proposed solutions of the Country Life Commission were headed in the wrong direction. His words were

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[123]Leo Marx, The Pilot and the Passenger: Essays on Literature, Technology, and Culture in the United States (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 118.

[124]Page Smith, The Rise of Industrial America: A People's History of the Post-Reconstruction Era (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), 422, 426, 429.

[125]Theobald, 164-165.

[126]Smith, 427.

[127]Carl Degler, Out of Our Past: The Forces that Shaped Modern America (New York: Harper and Row, 1984), 355.

not heeded until it was too late. The migration to the cities was unabated and inevitable, just as he predicted:

> All attempts to retard the movement of population from country to city by raising the standard of agriculture will prove worse than futile. It is said that if agriculture were made profitable, as it might be by scientific methods, farmers would not wish to abandon it. . . .[But], the more intelligent or scientific the farming is, the smaller will be the number of farmers required to produce the needed supply, and the larger will be the number driven from country to city.[128]

As Daniel Boorstin states, "While the ***isolated*** farmer may have been an unhappy farmer, the ***unisolated*** farmer often ceased to be a farmer." (emphasis added)[129]

It took the nature-minded Transcendentalists and other sensitive people of the age to turn the country people's attention to the earth. A famous Cornell horticulturist, Liberty Hyde Bailey, was instrumental in beginning the movement of incorporating the formal study of nature into the curriculum of the country schools. The *Cornell Rural School Leaflet* was distributed to common school children around the country. These were part of the initial effort by agricultural colleges to interest country school children in the rural environment surrounding them. They had ideas for teachers to incorporate specific nature activities into their curriculum. Volume ten, number four, of the *Cornell Rural School Leaflet*, opened with this message:

> You boys and girls are so thoroughly alive to the many opportunities that you have for interesting study and activity in the out-of-doors, on the farm, and at home, that you think of them for yourselves. SPRING HAS COME. You do not need to be reminded of it first-hand. It comes to you in sound, in odor, in sight, in feeling. Bird song and the call of peepers, wild flowers

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[128]Josiah Strong, The Twentieth-Century City (New York, 1898), 33-54, as reprinted in Annals of America 12, 219.

[129]Boorstin, Democratic Experience, 133.

> and the smell of freshly-turned earth . . . all these and many others tell you it is spring.[130]

Liberty Hyde Bailey also instituted Arbor Day programs during which students planted trees to beautify their school yards.[131] A note to teachers of rural schools announced that there would be a summer school that year (1916) at the New York State College of Agriculture, Cornell, with no tuition charge. Lessons on how to incorporate the new physical training and courses on birds and nature studies would be offered. Thus, thanks to the efforts of many reformers and progressive thinkers, school teachers were encouraged to teach a curriculum embracing nature study and appreciation. What might have been taken for granted earlier was now being strongly recommended.

This attitude is illustrated by a poem composed for students. Written by A. Twichell, the poem was published in a book used for school recitations in 1898. It is a "modern" version of the well-known *Mary Had a Little Lamb*, showing the new country school attitude of close involvement with nature. By comparing this version with the original, we see evidence of changes affected in the country school over the course of the nineteenth century.

The original poem, written by Sarah Josepha Hale in 1830, had Mary's lamb following her to school "which was against the rule." This interruption "made the children laugh and play/To see a lamb at school." Clearly, school and farm were seen as separate spheres, and they only interfaced by accident (Mary's lamb). The lesson conveyed by the rest of Hale's poem is a moral one: proper treatment of animals is rewarded by returned affection. "What makes the

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[130]Edward M. Tuttle, Cornell Rural School Leaflet 10, no.4 (Ithaca, NY: Department of Rural Education of the New York State College of Agriculture at Cornell University, 1917).
[131]Theobald, 161.

lamb love Mary so?/Mary loves the lamb, you know."[132] This is a lesson of the heart: when Mary loves the lamb and takes care of it, the lamb loves her back.

By the end of the century, Mary and her lamb have a different lesson to teach. Here the lamb is employed in an interdisciplinary science lesson where the students can actually touch and examine the animal close-up, and then they have the opportunity to draw and write about the experience. As the poet Twichell explains in the last stanza, "I'm glad that time a change has wrought/Regarding education/Now children's minds are used for thought,/Their eyes for observation." What was seen as an intrusion of nature into an earlier schoolmaster's domain was treated as a serendipitous occasion for learning in the one-room school of the late nineteenth century.

***Mary's Lamb "Up to Date"* by Agnes A. Twichell, 1898.**

If Mary's little lamb, my dears,
Had lived in '98,
The little bleating woolly thing,
Would have met a better fate.

For if it followed her to school,
The teacher kind would say;
"Why, Mary, dear, I'm glad he's here,
I think we'll let him stay."

The children all would gather round
Discussing every feature.
As though a treasure they had found,
They'd talk about the creature.

They'd draw a picture of it, too.
'Twould really do them credit,
And then a story each would write,
'Twould please you if you read it.

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[132]Mary Nancy Graham, Fifty Songs for Children (Racine, WI: Whitman Publishing Co., 1964), 15.

The lamb would be allowed to roam
Around the room at pleasure,
And when at noon it trotted home,
[It's] joy would know no measure.

I'm glad that time a change has wrought
Regarding education
Now children's minds are used for thought,
Their eyes for observation.[133]

Examples such as this light-hearted poem and the *Cornell Rural School Leaflet* show the introduction of nature study, zoology, and ecology into the one-room school by the late nineteenth century. Primary sources, like the well-preserved, student-made herbarium from 1896 still intact at the Preble County Historical Society, reveal extensive work with plant samples and data.[134] This example, from an essay test in the 1920's, shows the obvious applicability of the curriculum to the rural environment of the students:

1. Name the five worst weeds in your locality and give the best methods of eradicating them.
2. What are hotbeds? How are they constructed? Of what value are they to the gardener?[135]

Though a product of those outside of the rural school, nature-study became a part of the common school experience through the teachers who incorporated it into the curriculum, keeping pace with the needs of the agrarian society.

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[133]E. L. Loehr, ed., Inspiring Recitations for the School and Home (Chicago: Meyer & Brothers, 1898), Special Collections, Gardner Museum of Architecture and Design, Quincy, IL.

[134]Edith Hart, Eaton High School Herbarium, May 1896, Special Collections, Preble County Historical Society, Eaton, OH. A blue notebook still full of the plant samples collected and secured in neatly with tiny pieces of pink cloth tape. Includes plant description and scientific data.

[135]Casey, sec. C, p. 4.

CHAPTER VI
MEMORIES OF SCHOOLHOUSES

But the schoolhouse itself was typically more than just a place for children to receive instruction, it was also the location for many adult activities . . . Indeed, people often viewed the school as a critical symbol of community identity.[136]

The actual structure of the schoolhouse has always been a favorite repository for many nostalgic memories of those who attended it. In 1993, the community of Scott Bar in Northern California hired some contractors to reinforce the disintegrating flooring at their local schoolhouse-turned-community hall. When the Native-American contractors, Mike Two Feathers and his partner, Crow, were underneath the building, they found a sizable stash of "school paraphernalia" including primers, McGuffey's 1879 reading and phonics charts, maps, attendance records and even faded candy wrappers from five-cent Checkers Popcorn Confections. This brought a surge of community interest and nostalgic memories in the old schoolhouse.[137] Residents like Virgil Nesbitt (attended 1928-1934) recalled the time when the schoolboys decided to make homemade root beer. They set it in the attic of the schoolhouse to "age" until the warmth of the stove caused the tops to blow off the bottles, and the root beer concoction dripped through the ceiling into the schoolroom.[138]

The Glebe Schoolhouse in Augusta County, Virginia, stands empty but not forgotten. Even the Virginia Landmarks Register sounds poetically nostalgic

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[136]Alan J. DeYoung and Barbara Kent Lawrence, "On Hoosiers, Yankees, and Mountaineers: Dilemmas in Rural Education," Phi Delta Kappan 77, no. 2, October 1995, 111.

[137]Nancy Drennon, "Very Old Writings Found in Scott Bar Community Hall," Siskiyou County (CA) Daily News, 25 October 1993.

[138]Miller, 14-15.

in its description: "Now empty, the simple building stands as a picturesque example of a vanishing aspect of rural America."[139] All across the country you will find local historical societies, often teaming up with a college or university, restoring their local schoolhouses.

Childhood Aspects of Memories

On the centennial or anniversary of a schoolhouse, people gather from all over the country to pay homage to the "little country school" where they, and often their parents, attended for their formative years of schooling. Such eruptions of nostalgia bring the reading of poems, the singing of specially written songs, and the making of speeches honoring the school itself, the teachers, and the community spirit which it embodied. A homecoming for the "Little Brown School House" in Harrison Township, Preble County, Ohio, was held on May 6, 1915. It inspired former student Addie Robbins to write this poem and dedicate it "To Little Brown and Its People":

> Many of us have wandered away
> But we are glad to return, today
> To the old school ground, where many joys
> We had as merry girls and boys.
>
> Often when the days were cool
> We trudged along our way to school.
> And when the snow drifts piled high
> We tried to make the moments fly. . . .[140]

The poem continues on to list the "many joys" of the schoolhouse such as spelling lessons learned, teachers' unique qualities, recess games, and the excitement of having an organ brought for a singing program. In this, we see

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[139]Joe Nutt, Staunton, (VA) Daily News Leader, 6 October 1992, sec. A, p. 7.

[140]Wolfe, Carl and Beatrice, The Story of Little Brown, pamphlet printed in 1976, Special Collections, Preble County Public Library, Eaton, OH.

how the memorial of the building brings back related memories of teachers, lessons, and friends at recess. The schoolhouse has become, for Addie Robbins, a symbol of her happy memories of childhood with her schoolmates and teachers.

Community Aspects of Memories

The Stone School in Delhi, New York was the site for a Centennial Celebration on September 2, 1922. Miss Eva Morse composed a song celebrating the fond memories of the schoolhouse:

I would sing of a school not built on sands
That since eighteen-twenty's stood;
'Tis the school that first in Memory stands
And 'tis one not made of wood.

Chorus: Then hurrah for our school, the Stone School House,
Four years past a century old;
Not in books nor bronze, but in human lives
Its story now is told.

'Tis a friendly school beside the road
Not far from the Delaware's banks;
And the glorious Catskills o'er it bode,
Lifting up their heads in thanks.

'Tis a school that stands for the four-fold life,
Mind and body, heart and soul;
With plans for service it now is rife,
"All men for God" is its goal.[141]

Miss Eva Morse's song commemorates not what personal memories she holds dear, but rather the role of the school in the community. The real glory of the Stone School is in the many "human lives" which have experienced and venerated the place for over one hundred years.

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[141]Lena O. Borden Tiffany, The Old Stone School House (New York: Carlton Press, Inc., n.d.).

Dunraven School. District No. 10. Built originally in 1820. Reconstructed in 1860.

Known to the local community as the Old Stone Schoolhouse. Several years ago, community efforts saved this school from destruction. The school property had been slated to become part of the New York Reservoir system.

Further Down the Road in Delhi, New York

As the last stanza reads, "'Tis a school that stands for the four-fold life,/Mind and body, heart and soul." Educating the mind, body, heart, and soul represents the broad spectrum of learning experiences in the one-room school, especially after the reforms of the late nineteenth century. Children were educated in their ***minds***---a solid core of academics; their ***bodies***---hygiene and physical education; their ***hearts***---a firm foundation of right social behavior; and their ***souls***---a Biblically-based set of moral truths. "All men for God" is the goal of the school.

The many Biblical references point to the general understanding that the morals of the society are based upon the foundation of the Bible. This was a commonly held belief in the rural sectors of our country for centuries.[142] As Cremin says, "The Biblical metaphors were neither ornamental nor even prudently didactic; they were of the essence. It was in the language and substance of religion that nineteenth-century Americans pondered the meaning of their individual and public experiences."[143] What William W. Dimmick said of the Stone School could have been said of most one-room schools across the United States: "The influence of the Stone School House and its work in this community has been three-fold: the center of a school, religious and agricultural community."[144]

In the minds of the rural students long after they graduated from its doors, the country schoolhouse symbolized much more than the educational aspects of rural living. It was inextricably intertwined with the activities and people of the community. Helen Mason attended a one-room school from 1915-1922 in

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[142]James R. Dickenson, Home on the Range: A Century on the High Plains (New York: Scribner, 1995), 98-111.

[143]Cremin, 17.

[144]William Warren Dimmick, "Address at the Centennial Celebration of the Stone Schoolhouse, September 2, 1922," in Tiffany, n.p.

central Iowa. She recalls, "The schoolhouse was the one place in our community where there was an occasional gathering of neighbors, [since] there was no church in our area."[145] Use of the building for community functions included singing classes in the evenings, Friday night literaries, Sunday schools, elections, dances, and traveling lectures. Seth Schlotterbeck remembers going to the schoolhouse for a demonstration of the first "talking machine" [phonograph] in the area, something no one had ever seen or heard of in Preble County, Ohio.[146] Quartz Valley School is still fondly remembered as the center of the small town of Scott Valley, California: "Looking toward its 130th year, [it] is still a focal point in community life, and serves as a constant reminder of our connection with the past."[147]

Even the original construction of the school was a community affair. Usually taking from two to three days to build, it was considered a "frolic," and often included a community supper provided by the women.[148] Once the structure was built, its upkeep was generally seen to by members of the community who gathered annually for cleaning and repairing before the next term began. Someone would also supply the stock of wood for the winter school. The people of the community were further tied to the schoolhouse as they elected or served on the school board. Through these elections, members of the community played a direct role in the educational system; "they had faith in the democratic process" at the local level.[149] Notably, these elections were

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[145]Helen Mason, written interview with author, Fredericksburg, VA, 24 January 1997.

[146] Seth Schlotterbeck, Some Preble County School Notes, cassette tape, transcribed by Michelle Cude, 7 April 1994, Public School Files, Preble County Historical Society, Eaton, OH.

[147]Miller, 140.

[148]R. E. Lowry, History of Preble Co. Ohio: Her People, Industries and Institutions (Cleveland: H. Z. Williams and Brothers, Publishers, 1881), n.p.

[149]Peters, n.p.

the first to include women in the vote.[150] All of these connections deepened the ties of the community to the rural school.

Origin of the Romanticized Schoolhouse Image

In his analysis of the "little red schoolhouse" as a cultural icon, Fred Schroeder traces the image back to the 1870's, attributing it to the literary contributions of John Greenleaf Whittier and the artistic ones of Winslow Homer. Whittier's famous poem *In School Days* conjures up images of sweet innocence and enduring love. (See frontispiece for copy of this poem.) According to Schroeder, however, the actual schoolhouse to which Whittier was referring had a much less romantic destiny. It was abandoned in favor of a new school building, and deserted until someone wanted it moved. But when the wheel carrying one corner of the old schoolhouse broke in the process of moving it, it was again left by the side of the road, until schoolboys burned it down years later. Whether or not it was really red is not known, but Whittier's word on the matter would have little credence since he was colorblind.[151]

Winslow Homer furthered the soft diffused image with his bucolic scene *Snap the Whip* (1872). Here we see evidence that the schoolhouse was not a real image but rather a symbolic one to Homer since he painted two versions: one with the tall mountains in the background and one in the midst of prairie grasslands. The version with the tall mountain scenery (the more famous one) was a purely imagined landscape. It is said that Homer's paintings of this genre "reinvent childhood, merging nostalgia for his own boyhood in Cambridge,

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[150]Sklar, n.p.

[151]Fred Schroeder, "The Little Red Schoolhouse," in Icons of America, Ray Browne and Marshall Fishwick, eds., (Bowling Green, OH: Popular Press of Bowling Green State University, 1978), 155. According to Schroeder's architectural study, most schoolhouses were probably white, not red. If they were red, it was the cheap barn paint (deep, dull red color) as opposed to the bright, fire-engine red enamel—a museum favorite for painting restored schoolhouses.

Massachusetts, with memories of a bygone world of warmth, trust, and shared experiences."[152] Through his conceptualization of the one-room school, Homer helped to popularize the romanticism attached to the "little red schoolhouse."[153]

View from the Reformers

But were these buildings truly so quaint in their original use as they seem to be in the memories of former students, poets, and artists? Reformers like Bernard and Mann report deplorable conditions in the schoolhouses they visited. Their observations, however, were made predominantly in the 1830's and 40's; thus, the schoolrooms they criticize were quite different than those a half-century later. People were quick to believe the popular literary accounts by writers like Hamlin Garland who wrote in derogatory terms about the schoolhouse where he had taught in his book *Prairie Folks*:

> Our schoolhouse did not change---except for the worse. No one thought of adding a tree or a vine to its ugly yard . . . bare as a nose it stood at the crossroads, receiving us through its drab doorway as it had from the first. Its benches, hideously hacked and thick with grime, were as hard and uncomfortable as when I first saw them, and the windows remained unshaded and unwashed.[154]

This image is quite old-fashioned by the time of his writing, as benches were outmoded by the 1840's in favor of desks with seats attached. Thus, his critical tone is not applicable to the schools of the 1890's when he was writing; yet, readers tended to generalize these harsh comments well into the age of more progressive schools. The reformed schoolhouses at the end of the nineteenth century had improved remarkably in their physical structure and

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[152]Ibid.

[153]James Thomas Flexnar, The World of Winslow Homer: 1836-1910 (New York: Time Life Books, Inc., 1966), 24-26.

[154]As quoted in Theobald, 166-167.

environment, thanks in large measure to the Progressives who demonstrated the need for a clean, well-ventilated, commodious schoolhouse.

As the nineteenth century drew to a close, reformers' attention turned from focusing on the poor conditions of schools (which had actually improved by then), to criticizing the general out-moded form of education they represented. The inevitable future for one-room schools was written in the consolidation movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as reformers pushed forward in their impassioned zeal for closing one-room schools in favor of the new consolidated schools.

Consolidation Movement

The loss of the one-room school is historically attributed to the consolidation movement. Consolidation meant bussing students to a central location for a much larger, graded school. There students would allegedly have better educational opportunities with more classmates, better qualified teachers, and more advanced facilities. By consolidating all of the small rural districts into one more modern school, the reformers felt resources could be used more effectively, resulting in a vast improvement in the quality of education. Frederick W. Taylor, known as the "Apostle of the American Gospel of Efficiency," said, "In the past, the man has been first, in the future, the system must be first."[155] Efficiency, embodied in institutions, was meant to cure the disintegration of society brought about by modern times and the shift from an agricultural to a more urban society. By the turn of the century, America had a healthy, growing

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[155]Frederick W. Taylor, The Principles of Scientific Management (1911) as quoted in Boorstin, Democratic Experience, 363.

passion for regimentation, institution-building, standardization, and bureaucracy.[156]

So, why were the farmers so set against this move when it appeared to have such advantages for their children? They were apprehensive of a system that would take their children so far away--- away from the agricultural communities, away from the locally-controlled institution, and away from the watchful eyes of their parents. Parents realized that if their children left the farms to go to school in town, they would eventually leave forever. Their fears proved well-grounded as the exodus from rural to urban areas increased over the course of the consolidation movement.[157]

This centralization occurred at different times across the United States, anywhere from 1850 through 1950, but nearly everywhere there was considerable public outcry against the movement. In Fairfax County, Virginia, the issue of consolidation of schools was met with ardent community resistance. Superintendent W. T. Woodson explained that there was "considerable opposition to overcome. . . . Every time the bond issue for supporting the consolidated system came up, it was defeated, so they had to find the money from some other source."[158] School Board records in the Midwest show persistent effort on the part of rural families to squelch the movement to a centralized school. In Preble County, Ohio, the School Superintendent's Report of January 1913 states: "First direct vote on centralization, November, 1910,

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[156] Thomas J. Schlereth, Victorian America: Transformations of Everyday Life: 1876-1915 (New York: Harper Collins, 1991). 31. The number of schools in the United States decreased from 238,000 in 1903 to 79,876 in 1992, thus showing the success of the consolidation movement. The justification educationally is now under question, however, and several states in the midwest have passed laws initiated by the citizens to halt further consolidation. See the DeYoung and Lawrence article (statistics, p.115).

[157] Gulliford, 43.

[158] Fairfax County Schools, "History of Fairfax County Schools: Decades of Change, Years of Challenge" (Fairfax, VA: Fairfax County Public Schools, n.d.), videotape #11653.

defeated by thirty-three votes." However, by November 1912 the centralization issue passed because so many schools had declined so far in enrollment that they had to be closed.[159] In Iowa by 1920, only 580 districts were consolidated, this represented less than twenty percent of all the districts in the state. Because of the higher taxes required of the consolidated districts, the number of centralized school districts fell to 412 by 1931.[160]

Fear within the farming communities also focused upon the issue of bussing the students to the consolidated schools. Many farmers' wives voiced their deep-seated trepidation that their children would be killed by riding vehicles such distances away. Here we see the resident fear of the unknown. Distance has become the heart of the contention. It was not really the change of school curriculum, new graded class structure, or the increased number of pupils, but rather the location that upset the rural families. They were losing the center of the community: the LOCAL schoolhouse. By sacrificing their one-room school, the residents feared losing control. This was the overwhelming feeling in the rural community during the end of the nineteenth and into the twentieth century: losing control, losing identity, losing touch with their children.[161] The local farmers' position was supported by the American Association of School Administrators who stated:

> Keep the schools and the government of the schools close to the people, so that the citizens generally, including the parents and taxpayers, may know what their schools are doing, and may have an effective voice in the school program. . . . The relationship of the schools to the people are of first-rate educational significance and are not to be sacrificed in the interest of "efficiency." If such a sacrifice is made to establish economical

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[159]Hiestand, 263.

[160]William H. Dreier, "Our Country School Heritage," transcript of speech for the Historical Project of the Red Oak Public Library and the Montgomery County Historical Society, 4 February 1989, Special Collections, Gardner Museum of Architecture and Design, Quincy, IL.

[161]DeYoung and Lawrence, 108-125.

> districts, we will find in a generation that ***something of deep significance which money cannot buy has been destroyed.*** (italics added)[162]

In the end, they lacked the strength to stand against the great force of "progress" which moved ever in the direction of institution-building and the "bigger is better" philosophy at the turn of the century.

The End of the One-Room School

The loss of the country school was lamented by the members of that community.[163] Milton S. Johnson regretted the closing of the District 36 School in Lincoln County, South Dakota in 1926: "When the country school went, much of the rural social life disintegrated. Its common center, the school, was no more."[164] As Robert Wiebe explains, "The great casualty of America's turmoil late in the (19th) century was the island community."[165] By "island community" he is referring to the vestiges of old-fashioned community values, those localities which often rallied around a common school as the symbol of their cohesiveness as a community and the values which set them apart as such.

Wiebe continues, "They fought . . . to preserve the society that had given their lives meaning. . . but it had already slipped beyond their grasp."[166] And so, the local one-room schoolhouse became a symbol to them of all that was good

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[162]American Association of School Administrators, Schools in Small Communities (Washington, D.C.: National Education Association, 1939), as quoted in Gulliford, 44-45.

[163]In Washington, D.C. today, parents are still fighting to hold onto their neighborhood elementary school. The District wants to close Lewis Elementary in Northwest permanently and bus the children across town to another school with declining demographics. According to one parent, "It's the only part of our community that both the newcomers and the oldtimers agree on--the importance of keeping the local community school open."——source: CBS Eyewitness News, Miriam Hernandez, reporter, "Washington D. C. School Board to Meet with Community to Discuss Relocation of Elementary School in NW Washington," channel 9, 3 April 1997, 11:09 p.m.

[164]Falk, 68.

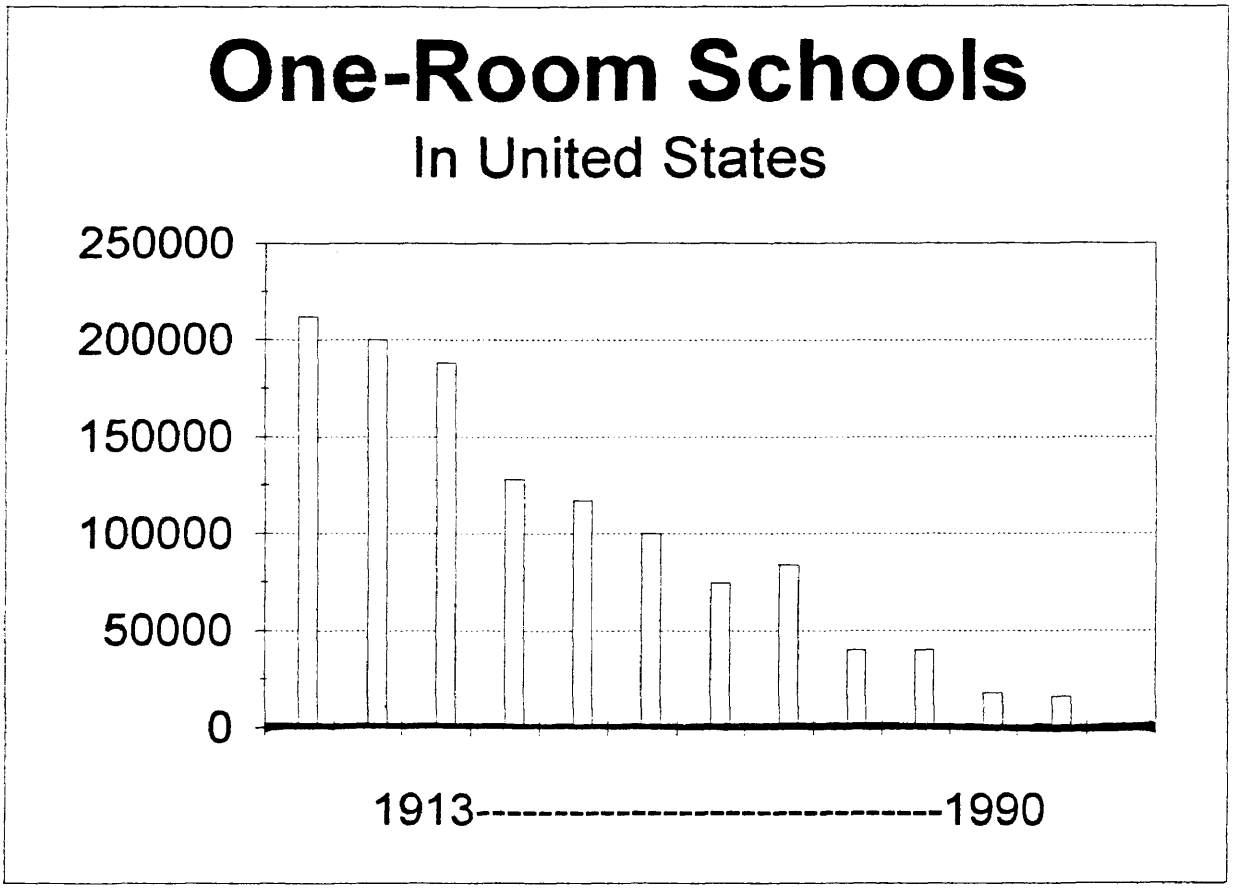
[165]Wiebe, 44.

[166]Ibid.

and worth fighting for, and all that was eventually lost in the modern "progressive" world. As the sight of an abandoned schoolhouse passes from view, you can almost sense the loss those people felt, not so much for the school itself, but more for the whole rural way of life---for the time when to be "American" meant to be a farmer, live in the country, go to the country school, worship at the local church, and gather with neighbors at the picnic in June.

The fate of the one-room school was sealed with the consolidation movement. Whenever this occurred in a particular locality, the effect was resolute: the demise of the close community. Now we are left with only the memories. It is not the pros and cons of educational methods which are fondly remembered, but rather the individual accomplishments and feelings of camaraderie within the rural school. So, where does the true narrative of the one-room school lie---in the failed educational evaluation of the reformers, or in the successful experiences of most students? The truth lies in both. While there were limitations and frustrations in the experience of a rural school education, most of my research has shown that students found other advantages which outweighed the deficiencies: the family-like atmosphere, firm moral foundation, effective teaching methods, and the supportive, safe environment. We cannot fully understand the worth of the one-room school until we comprehend both the human experiences as well as the pedagogical arguments.

As a community boarded up and auctioned off its one-room schoolhouse, more was ending than a form of education. They were losing the community spirit, the values and virtues of the rural community, and the moral foundations. These losses made fertile soil for growing nostalgia.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CHAPTER VII
CONCLUSION: LEGACY OF ONE-ROOM SCHOOLS

The Flowering of Nostalgia

Given the disputed state of education in the one-room school, the question remains: why is its memory infused with such nostalgia? Where did the image of idyllic innocence and the ideal academic setting come from, in light of what we have just discussed about the difficulties of teaching, the inherent weaknesses in the system, and the poor conditions of the schools? I would argue that what people are remembering is not the school itself, but rather what the one-room school symbolizes---the simple virtues of rural life, the sense of community, the ethics of hard work, and the solid moral foundation. It is the loss of these virtues which continues to prompt the nostalgic yearning for a return to the past.

When an eighty-six year old woman sees an image of a one-room schoolhouse, she is filled with nostalgia for the past---for the way things used to be. Certainly she is not thinking of the low pay for teachers or the lack of adequate supplies; rather, she is remembering the close feelings of community, the pride she felt in hard work accomplished, and the simpler ways and less complex times. Faced with the massive changes and the alterations in the community, no wonder she found comfort in the warm glow of the past. By reminiscing, she is relocating herself in a time and place where she feels safe, supported by a close-knit community where everyone shares her Judeo-Christian values and the simple belief in the reward of hard work and right living.

David Lowenthal, in his *The Past is a Foreign Country*, explains the appeal of the times when "life was simpler," as fear of the future "fuels today's nostalgia."[167] The impression that our society lacks the fundamental sense of community and moral values leads to the nostalgic appeal of the one-room school and the rural community values it represents.

This nostalgia flourished through the years and blossomed again when a researcher pulled up in her motorhome and began asking to hear the stories---the stories of the rural community, the experiences of growing up in a one-room schoolhouse. Beyond their usefulness as a historical source, their worth is far greater as lives are shared, appreciated, and written down for future generations of school children who might wonder about the experiences of the one-room school, and for future teachers and educational reformers who might learn some lessons from the one-room school.

The Legacy of the Schoolhouse

We are left with the question: What can we learn from the one-room schools today? Certainly they have left a legacy in the lives of those who attended them and taught in them, but also, they have affected the history of education in the United States. We are on a continuum of which the one-room schools were a part, and indeed continue to exert an influence on education today. In the words of Ellis Ford Hartford, author of *The Little White Schoolhouse*,

> It may be found that there was more to the little white schoolhouse and the neighborhood surrounding it than is suggested by mere nostalgic recollection and remembrances of former pupils. . . . Perhaps it is

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[167]Lowenthal, 8, 11.

> pertinent to suggest that Americans might well seek some of the same strengths and values in their diverse patterns of communities. . . .[168]

When its existence became threatened, its virtues became evident. Acting as the hub of community activity, the focus of community spirit, and the storehouse of moral virtues for society, the country school played an undisputed central role in the history of American culture. Perhaps its role is not yet over, as suggested by Andrew Gulliford:

> American educators and historians would do well to reconsider the egalitarian lessons learned in those plain, unassuming one-room buildings that cradled American education and democracy from the birth of the republic to World War II. One-room schools shaped American character and values more than many other institutions. If today we are concerned about literacy, basic skills, educational achievement and a sense of community, we should follow the historian's credo and learn the lessons of the past.[169]

But the world has changed dramatically since the era of one-room schools. It has been said that we now live in the Information Age. We do not live in the age of ***ideas*** or ***ideals***. 'Tis a pity to reflect on the ramifications of this on our country's future.[170] Our world is far more complex today than in the nineteenth century. Yet, I wonder, have we forgotten some of the essential, age-old truths which are all the more important to our society today? Does the country school have something to tell us from its wisdom and extensive experience? If there is a lesson for future generations, it is this: to hold onto that which ties us together, for it is only together that we can survive. America may pride itself on being the country of rugged individuals, yet in reality, we cannot exist without each other. The role of community is overlooked today. We

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[168]Hartford, as quoted in Gulliford, 45.

[169]Gulliford, 6.

[170]William R. L. Haley, "The Distinctiveness of a Disciple," sermon preached at Falls Church Episcopal, 28 July 1996, Falls Church, VA.

may not find it in the places we live, but instead in the places we work and worship. Either way, we must not underestimate its essential function in our lives.

The rural community values of honesty, thrift, hard work, and upright character are needed now more than ever. Perhaps we have grown tired of the moral vacuum that permeates this society. "Without virtue, we turn to . . . V-chips for every television set, metal detectors in all public schools, volunteers paid by the government to volunteer."[171] We don't even understand the meaning of good citizenship anymore. The Boy Scouts of America conducted a survey of adult males from across the country; the results were shocking. When asked, "What makes a good citizen?" twenty-six percent said it means "keeping physically fit," while only twelve percent responded "volunteering time in the community."[172]

The Continuing Influence of Country Schools on Education

Interestingly, in education, we sit on the crux of many of the same problems faced by the reformers and educators of the early twentieth century. Increased immigration has filled our classrooms with different peoples who do not know American culture and language. We are faced with a cultural identity crisis not unlike the one they were facing then. We have some of the same worries about the applicability of the subjects taught in school to the "real" world of the job market. We still struggle with how to deal with the disruptive student.[173] We still voice concerns about bussing and whether it has really

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[171]Joe Bush, "Virtue and the Free Society," in Imprimis: Because Ideas Have Consequences 26, no. 4, April 1997, 2.

[172]Ibid.

[173]Hayfield Secondary School is piloting a "new" program for the 1997-98 school year: a Time-Out Room for sending disruptive students out of the regular classroom. This "new" idea is referenced in many accounts of reformed schools of the early twentieth century.

solved more problems than it has brought. Schools are again trying to regain that community interest in the school that we lost with consolidation. My colleagues and I complain of the increased demands to meet diverse students needs, without the support of the community or the parents. We are refocusing attention on the issue of graded classrooms---is it such a good idea to segregate students into rigid groups by age, or do they all learn at a different rate? The praises of peer-tutoring and self-paced learning echo the voices of the one-room school.

There are about seven hundred existing public one-room schools in the United States today.[174] This number is rising due to a renaissance in the methods and advantages of the intimate educational experience in the small classroom of the rural school. In the face of repeated criticism for the institutionalized educational system we have today, these schools represent a viable option for the future.

Perhaps the legacy of the one-room schoolhouse is more alive than we realize?

Historical Lessons from the Schoolhouse

Historically speaking, the lessons of the one-room school teach us to refrain from over generalizing a subject from one set of resources. By examining the primary sources written at the time, the reformers' complaints of the era, as well as the nostalgic remembrances of the generation of students and teachers, we have effectively complicated the issue to better represent the many facets of reality. Truth, as we have seen, can be found in many places and under many disguises.

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[174]Gulliford, America's Country Schools, 278.

Personal Lessons from the Schoolhouse

Personally speaking, I see the very values that the one-room school stood for as the ones missing in our schools today. Thus, I can understand the nostalgic appeal of this time when these values were an integrated part of the education in the one-room schools: the closeness of many rural school teachers to their students, the emphasis on a moral education (and thus the grounding for a moral society), the closeness to nature (however late in coming to the rural schools), and the simpler life they seemed to evoke. As the writer of the Preble Co. history of education wrote: "The people of that day thought more in grooves, it might be, than the people of today, and their knowledge was not so broad as at the present time, but certainly it reached deeper down, and as a character builder has not been surpassed."[175]

The experience of researching this thesis has finally culminated in the intellectual exercise of writing this paper. However, the full experience of the Masters' program at William and Mary has encompassed many years. It has taken me across the country in search of the story of one-room schools. It has introduced me to dozens of fascinating and friendly people, and has forced me to reason through my own expectations for teaching. The actual writing of the thesis, though a stretching intellectual exercise, has not been the totality of the experience. It has only been the conclusion, and yet in a real sense, also the beginning of the saga of my own teaching experiences. In this continually unfolding story, I hope to touch the lives of hundreds of school children in the way so many one-room schoolteachers did years ago. After all, the real heart of

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[175]Hiestand, 240.

teaching has not changed. As Laura Ingalls Wilder explained to the children who loved her stories:

> The Little House books are stories of long ago. The way we live and your schools are much different now, so many changes have made living and learning easier. But the real things haven't changed. It is still best to be honest and truthful; to make the most of what we have; to be happy with simple pleasures and to be cheerful and have courage when things go wrong.[176]

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[176]Laura Ingalls Wilder, letter written on the occasion of her eightieth birthday to chidren, Phil Greetham, "The Story of Laura's Life" [online] Available http://ourworld. compuserve.com/homepages/p_greetham/letter.htm, 15 July 1997.

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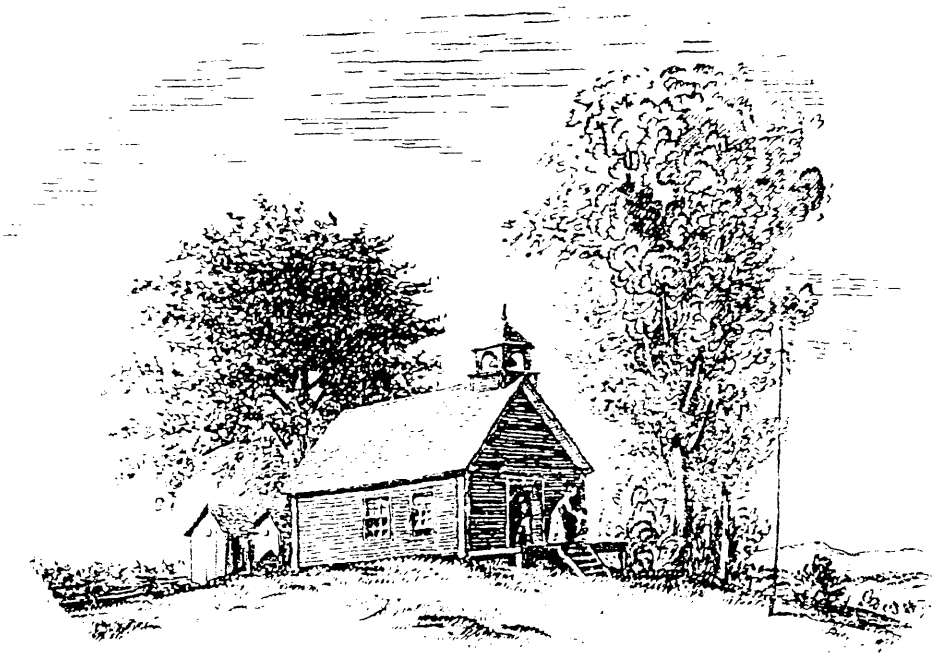
On the Road



VITA

Michelle Dawn Cude

Michelle was born in San Jose, California on April 25, 1966. She attended U. C. Berkeley, graduating with honors in 1988 with a B.A. in history, emphasis on colonial American and Russian. Relocating to the east coast to pursue her dreams of working at Colonial Williamsburg, she was a character actor at the museum and developed children's training and programming. Reliving the eighteenth century certainly had its appeal, with ball gowns and candlelight, gardening and harpsichord lessons. But she chose to pursue graduate study at the historic College of William and Mary in 1989 in the American Studies field.

Once she completed her coursework, she returned to California in order to get a teaching certificate. Always a teacher at heart, she attended National University for the graduate study to obtain a California Teaching Credential for Social Sciences, 7-12. Returning to the east coast for a teaching position in Fairfax County, Virginia, she decided to finish the masters program at William and Mary long-distance. The completion of this masters thesis represents the culmination of several years of study and research of one-room schools across the United States.